Hollywood, Etc.: Invasion of the idea snatchers

by James Hebert

In "The Invasion," Nicole Kidman finds herself looking around nervously, wondering if people she took for friends and family are really a plague of imitations.

THEY'RE COMING - 'Knockoff' movies, such as 'Transmorphers,' are sometimes touted as tie-ins, but there's often no business connection to the original film, in this care 'Transformers.' CNS Photo. Maybe movie fans can relate.

Three weeks before the recent release of the sci-fi thriller - the latest take on the "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" tale - a new film came out on DVD called "Invasion of the Pod People."

It arrived courtesy of a small L.A. production house called The Asylum, and if that name doesn't sound familiar, the titles of some of its recent movies might: There was "The Da Vinci Treasure." There was "H.G. Wells' War of the Worlds." There was "Pirates of Treasure Island." There was "Snakes on a Train." (Yes, "Train.")

More recently, there was "Transmorphers," which isn't exactly a word, but - what are the odds? - it seems the title "Transformers" was already taken, by the Michael Bay blockbuster that debuted one week later.

There's nothing rare about imitation and piggybacking and coattail-riding in Hollywood, of course. The town is practically founded on those ideals. It's just that Asylum has made an art form out of the blatant and brazen ways it puts such virtues into practice.

"Whhaaaatttt??" David Michael Latt reacts with mock surprise over the phone, when the impending release of the Kidman movie is mentioned.

In truth, the Asylum co-founder has heard plenty about the practice he likes to call "tie-ins" over the past couple of years - on Web message boards and in a contentious appearance on "The Today Show" awhile back.

But while he confesses completely to taking advantage of Hollywood's massive marketing mojo, Latt insists the company is not trying to bumfuzzle anybody into believing Asylum's releases are big-studio product.

"No one wants to feel the sucker, feel the fool," he says. "I know it's hard to say because I definitely benefit in some ways with the tie-ins. But it's certainly not the intent to say, 'Hey, we're really the Michael Bay film.' Or really the Spielberg film.

"We're basically saying, 'Hey, we're going to give you a different option.' I really hope (consumers are) not confused. I honestly do. Because I don't want them to be feeling disappointed, or that they're the sucker or the fool.

"I want them to be entertained."

Even a cursory viewing of the Asylum tie-in movies vs. their major studio counterparts would seem to dispel confusion pretty quickly. For one thing, despite their titles' almost comical mimicry, the Asylum films often follow unrelated story lines.

For another, the movies clearly are not in the same budget league. In "Pod People," for example, a horrible, space-borne infestation spreads via what appears to be sprigs of ginger root.

The movies' packaging might be another matter; consumers who are too hasty in their video-rental habits could well glance at the lineup of scalawags on the cover of "Pirates of Treasure Island" and fail to notice that Johnny Depp is not among the direct-to-DVD veterans depicted.

"Got this instead of 'Pirates of the Caribbean 2' at the Blockbuster," as one viewer wrote on the forum for the Asylum movie at the film-centric Web site IMDB.com. "Now I'm (upset)."

A similar sentiment is voiced at the IMBD.com forum for "Transmorphers." One user wrote, "I only stumbled onto this movie after having mistaken it for 'Transformers.' That was disappointment No.1." (The movie, by the way, has received an IMDB user rating of 1.8 out of 10. That would tie it for seventh on the site's "Bottom 100" list if it weren't about 100 votes shy of the required 650.)

Among the Asylum "tie-in" films, "Pod People" actually is rare for the gap between its premiere and the release of a similarly themed big-studio movie. The Wells adaptation came out one day before Steven Spielberg's "War of the Worlds," starring Tom Cruise; Asylum's "King of the Lost World" likewise hit DVD a day earlier than Peter Jackson's "King Kong."

SOUND-ALIKES GALORE

When it comes to conspicuously similar-sounding creative works, of course, it's not as though Asylum has a monopoly on the phenomenon. It's not even something that happens only in Hollywood.

In May, some San Diego County theatergoers expressed anger over a performance of the show "Phantom" at the California Center for the Arts in Escondido.

The patrons felt they had been duped into buying tickets for what they believed was a production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's "The Phantom of the Opera." It turned out to be a different musical, written by Maury Yeston and Arthur Kopit.

The arts center responded by severing ties with the group that produced "Phantom" and rented the center's theater to stage it. The center's president, Vicky Basehore, also said rental contracts would be revised to implement penalties for any future marketing misrepresentations.

In the movie business, the "tie-in" path may have been blazed in the early '90s by an outfit called GoodTimes Entertainment, which released a string of direct-to-video animated films that echoed some huge Disney movies of the time.

The films bore such familiar names as "The Little Mermaid," "Aladdin" and "Beauty and the Beast."

Disney sued in 1992 over the videos' packaging, but GoodTimes ultimately was allowed to continue marketing the films, whose stories were based on the same venerable legends and fairy tales as were Disney's.

Latt says Asylum has yet to attract any threats of legal action; the only sniping he's heard from the Hollywood establishment, he asserts, came from Brian Grazer, the mega-producer whose films include "The Da Vinci Code."

Judy Zaichkowsky, a professor of marketing at Canada's Simon Fraser University and the author of books including "Defending Your Brand Against Imitation," says she's surprised the big studios haven't paid more attention to Asylum's practices.

"(But) sometimes companies just let this fly because they don't see it as that much of a threat," she says. "And it's kind of more of a problem to deal with it than it is to let it fly.

"Only when they get to kind of taking a bit of market share do those companies feel they need to take notice."

As far as Asylum goes, it may soon be a moot point anyway. Latt says the company, which got its start 10 years ago making arthouse movies and then moved into "B" horror flicks, is getting out of the tie-in business.

Its next couple of releases, "30,000 Leagues Under the Sea" and "666: Part II," aren't tie-ins at all, although Latt says the film that follows those - "Eye of Omega" - is "sort of" tied to the Will Smith sci-fi thriller "I Am Legend."

The move away from the tie-ins might help blunt the vociferous criticism directed at Asylum on the Web over the past couple of years. But whether the derision fades or not, Latt professes not to care.

"On a personal level, I want to say that it doesn't bother me," he says. "And I think it doesn't bother me.

"I don't stay up at night. I just wish I could tell (the critics) otherwise. There are a lot of reasons for why we do what we do. And it's not because we don't love the audience or love the film genre, or love making movies.

"It's not like we're just making widgets."

Unless, just maybe, there's a widget worth mimicking.

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