

MOVIES



ROBERT ZUCKERMAN

RIDING THE WAVE: Eric Roberts, in white shirt, and Bronson Pinchot share a hug in "It's My Party," the story of a final gathering given by a man dying of AIDS.

FILM CLIPS OUT IN THE MARKETPLACE

'Gaysploitation' Films Find a Nicely Profitable Niche

LA TIMES 12/18/95
By Richard Natale

Some executives call it the arrival of "gaysploitation," 25 years after a comparable low-budget movement presaged the birth of mainstream African American films.

Hollywood observers say it's a classic case of successful niche marketing—the product being movies, the niche being the millions of gays and lesbians, many of whom are concentrated in major cities and have ample money to spend on entertainment to their liking.

Buoyed by recent box-office successes, small and large companies alike have been releasing gay- and lesbian-themed films into the marketplace at the rate of two or three a month—a trend that would have been difficult to foresee just a decade ago.

"Ten years ago there was still a stigma attached to gay-themed films," says Amir Malin, co-managing executive for October Films, who released the gay-themed "Maurice" when he was a principal at Cinecom in 1987.

"Maurice" failed to bring out much of the gay audience and grossed only \$2 million, but that same year, with the help of a best actor Oscar for William Hurt, another gay-themed film, "Kiss of the Spider Woman," grossed \$17 million.

Other low-budget hits such as "Parting Glances" and "My Own Private Idaho" displayed a steady pattern of acceptance from audiences in cities with large gay populations—and in some cases, with art-house patrons as well.

"Today a gay film that works can gross \$3 million to \$5 million even without any crossover or 'breakout' attendance from a more mainstream audience," says Russell Schwartz, president of Gramercy Pictures. "That's a bigger business than foreign films right now."

The real difference has been made by those films that have crossed over to a broader art-house audience, including "My Own Private Idaho" (\$7 million), "The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert" (\$11 million), "The Wedding Banquet" (\$7.5 million) and two studio films, TriStar's "Philadelphia" (\$75 million) and Amblin/Universal's "To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar" (more than \$36 million to date).

The receipts, often based on modest investments, have encouraged financiers to be more receptive to gay- and lesbian-themed projects.

Most are low-budget—independently made and distributed—and aimed primarily at the target audience. While the econom-

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ics may have limited upside potential, thematically these films have become much more varied.

"Many gay filmmakers are increasingly upset with the term *gay movie*," says Liz Manne, marketing head of Fine Line Features. "A gay film isn't a genre. Other than having gay characters or gay subject matter it can be a comedy, a drama, a mystery."

How else, she argues, can one lump together such diverse sensibilities as Pedro Almodóvar ("Law of Desire"), Gus Van Sant ("Idaho"), the late Derek Jarman ("Caravaggio"), Tom Kalin ("Swoon") and Maria Maggenti ("The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love")?

Interestingly, Manne doesn't include "drag" movies like "To Wong Foo" and "Priscilla" in the mix. "Those films are much more about costumes and fun than about homosexuality."

Some newer films chafe at those narrow strictures, says Trimark Pictures vice president Ray Price. They include "Total Eclipse," which opened in November, about the love affair between French poets Paul Verlaine and Artur Rimbaud, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and David Thewlis, and the upcoming "I Shot Andy Warhol," starring Lili Taylor as Valerie Solanas, the militant lesbian who tried to kill Warhol, with Steven Dorff as transvestite Candy Darling.

Jon Gerrans and Marcus Hu, two of the principals of Strand Releasing, which has distributed or produced a diverse sampling of gay and lesbian titles in the past few years, say "gaysploitation"—derived from the '70s moniker "blaxploitation"—is an apt term to describe the current genre.

Because African Americans were mostly invisible in mainstream films 25 years ago, an independent movement of low-budget comedies, action and horror films aimed specifically at the black audience was born. Years later, another independent movement took its place, led by African American directors such as Spike Lee and the Hughes Brothers. Similarly, Hu says, gay films are now broadening out.

"On my desk right now is a booklet from the Independent Feature Film Market in New York which lists the first gay action-hero movie," he says.

"And what does it tell you that I can name three studio films off the top of my head with either gay characters or gay themes?" Gerrans adds rhetorically. Those films are the current "Home for the Holidays," in which Robert Downey Jr. plays an obnoxious younger brother to Holly Hunter; "Birds of a Feather," an American remake of "La Cage aux Folles" starring Nathan Lane as a female impersonator and Robin Williams as his lover; and "It's My Party," the story of a final party given by

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a man dying of AIDS, starring Eric Roberts as the dying man and Gregory Harrison as his ex-lover.

As with blaxploitation films, there are many more titles aimed at men than at women. The reason, Fine Line's Manne says, "is that it tends to be men in any group who open the door first because they've traditionally had greater access to education and economic resources."

That's changing, too. "Lesbian films are only about two years behind the pattern of gay-themed films," Hu says.

Crossover business for these films, October Films' Malin says, is extremely review-sensitive. And even the broad-minded art-house audience doesn't always embrace sex and physical intimacy in gay films.

"Same-gender kissing [particularly men] still sends some people out of the theater," Manne says. "There were many walkouts on 'Priest.' That's why you didn't see kissing in 'Philadelphia.' They were criticized and unjustly so. It was better to play it safer and

expose the film to a larger audience."

(In "It's My Party," due out from MGM in February, Roberts' and Harrison's characters do share an onscreen kiss; earlier this year, the independently released "Jeffrey" featured a similar scene.)

Richard Jennings, executive director of the industry-created anti-discrimination group Hollywood Supports, agrees that "Philadelphia" played it safe in trying to appeal to a mass audience, but at the same time he contends "Philadelphia" was a great leap forward and has opened the door for more portrayals of gay themes and gay characters, both from the independents and from the studios."

And while Gerrans says that ancillary sales of gay and lesbian themed titles has blossomed over the past several years, they are also content-sensitive.

While a bold gay film like "The Living End" and the comedic "Priscilla" shipped 10,000 or more units, lesbian-themed titles tend to outsell gay-themed films in video. Says Malin: "There are 28,000 retailers and many in the Midwest and South won't accept male gayness, but female gayness is OK." □

Richard Natale is a frequent contributor to Calendar.