

Monday, December 12, 2005

Brokeback Mountain breaks per screen records... but will it play in Peoria?

The opening weekend numbers for Brokeback Mountain have been awesome - \$109,000 per screen in NYC, LA and San Francisco. As you can see at Box Office Mojo, that puts Brokeback Mountain in the position of having the highest grossing per screen average box office for a non-animated film - ever. Who did it beat? Evita (\$97k), Memoirs of a Geisha (\$84k - big weekend!), and Moulin Rouge (\$83k). It's been a big year for 'huge openers on a small number of screens' - Syriana, Corpse Bride, and The Aristocrats have all found great opening weekend success on a tiny number of screens, but none have exploded (at least not yet) across the landscape with any sort of huge impact. So how does that bode for Brokeback Mountain? Are the early numbers indicative of something huge to come, or is this a case of a film finding its major audience all in the first weekend? Clearly, NYC, LA and San Francisco are primo locations to open a film about homosexual romance between cowboys, and the directorship of Ang Lee is no small deal in such parts of the country, but can an Ang Lee 'gay movie' push into the national consciousness the way My Big Fat Greek Wedding did? Will the distributors get pushy with exhibitors and 'force' the film into cineplexes, or will the major movie houses wait for a hard money return to be evident, like they did with Fahrenheit 9/11? Or will it fade into obscurity like My Own Private Idaho?

Personally, this is a film that makes me harken back to The English Patient's box office run, which is odd because I haven't had cause to think about that overrated piece of cliché heaven for several years. The film had picked up solid metropolitan play pre-Oscars night, bringing in about \$30m in box office (which is a great result on its own for an arthouse flick), but it was the English Patient Oscar Night Scoop of multiple wins that saw it back in theaters in large numbers and earning dollars until the following September - \$78m in total. Brokeback Mountain has a high 'not interested' factor, mainly from teenage boys who don't go in for the gay stuff, and the Middle America crowd who don't generally fork out their Wal-Mart dollars for romance, let alone romance between Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger. But many of those people will go see the film if it wins ten Oscars - begrudgingly perhaps, but they'll take a shot on dollar night, just so they can say they did.

So keep an eye out for the "Brokeback Mountain will kill all records" hype tomorrow morning in the trades, and promptly ignore it. This is a film that will do well, at least compared to other films of a similar nature, but the Blair Witch Project numbers that some will predict are going to be way off the mark. After all, The Aristocrats has the 25th strongest opening weekend per screen average in film history - and it only made \$6m in total. Woody Allen's Melinda and Melinda hit the charts at #19, and it barely scraped \$4m.

'Daring' movies win awards, so look out for Brokeback Mountain at Oscar time... but don't bother looking for it at the Multiplex. America still has way too far to go before the inherent bigotry of the masses can take 'the gays' for any longer than an episode of Will & Grace.

Posted by Oz in Movie News at 14:37