

How 'War Room' Became a Biblical Box Office Smash

Outside of evangelical circles, the names Alex Kendrick and Stephen Kendrick are likely to be met with blank stares.

But thanks to low-budget hits like *Fireproof* and *Courageous*, the brothers have transformed themselves into Steven Spielbergs of Christian cinema. Their names above the title are enough to open movies that are firmly pitched to the faithful.

This drawing power was firmly on display when *War Room*, a celebration of the purpose-driven life, stunned box office watchers by nearly dethroning *Straight Outta Compton* as the weekend's highest-grossing domestic release with its \$11 million debut. That's particularly impressive given that the religious drama was playing on a third of the number of screens as the biopic.

"It's a great example of the power of a brand," said Chris Stone, founder of the consumer advocacy group Faith Driven Consumer. "The Kendrick brothers' films have an authenticity with this audience. They have consistently delivered a good product that resonates with the community."

Don't count reviewers among the fans. *War Room* has a woeful 18 percent "rotten" rating on Rotten Tomatoes, with critics like the Los Angeles Times' Michael Rechtshaffen dismissing the film as "mighty long-winded and wincingly overwrought."

Alex Kendrick, a former pastor who handles directing duties on the brothers' films, said the filmmakers are accustomed to the rough notices.

"Critics in Hollywood are rough with us," said Kendrick. "They don't understand why we make our movies or our worldview. But

our target audience gets them and that's who we want to draw closer to a walk with God."

War Room, the story of a disintegrating marriage rescued by intense prayer, was produced for a slender \$3 million and distributed by Sony's Affirm division. It is on pace to be among the Kendrick brothers' biggest hits, rivaling the \$34.5 million brought in by "Courageous" and the \$33.5 million generated from *Fireproof*. It also continues Sony's success with the genre—the studio scored with *Soul Surfer* and *Heaven is for Real*, as well as fielded the Kendricks' films.

Credit for *War Room*'s ticket sales surge goes to its cast of African-Americans. That allowed the film to draw from pools of black and white moviegoers, an essential ingredient in its success given that polling shows that African-Americans are more religious than the U.S. population as a whole.

Nearly 90 percent of African-Americans describe themselves as belonging to a religious group, with six out of ten coming from historically black protestant churches and 15 percent hailing from evangelical churches, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center. For *War Room*, that translated to a racially diverse opening weekend crowd that was 36 percent African-American and 42 percent Caucasian, according to exit data.

Dramatic necessity, not commercial considerations, was at the root of the decision, Kendrick claims.

"When we were working on the plot it just seemed more powerful and passionate when told through the perspective of African-Americans," said Kendrick. "I'm not sure it would have been as heart-grabbing if we hadn't done that."

Getting the word out about the picture involved a massive grassroots effort. Facebook was particularly active, as the film's page attracted more than half a million fans, though its presence on Twitter was only marginal. More important was

the work that the Kendricks did to raise awareness. The brothers shot set videos to keep audiences informed about the production and prepared packets that they sent to churches that included materials that could be incorporated into sermons prior to the film's release.

"For the Kendricks, the dialog is ongoing," said Rory Bruer, Sony's distribution chief. "The word gets out there and people are talking about the movie for many months before it opens. It all results in a cool crescendo."

Sony largely steered clear of wider-reaching platforms such as television and paid email marketing, and opted for a more conservative release pattern. Instead of debuting the film on 2,500 screens or more, as it would a typical wide-release, the studio launched it across 1,135 theaters that were heavily weighted toward the South and Midwest, where the populations are more religious.

"Films like this have an intense appeal across a narrow demographic," said Seth Willenson, an industry consultant. "You can reach a targeted audience."

War Room is hardly the first faith-based film to break out. Recent releases like *God's Not Dead* and *Heaven is for Real* have routinely affirmed the power of this audience. But when Hollywood has tried to commodify what the Kendricks do, by steering clear of the Biblical literalism and trying to make religious stories palatable for secular crowds, the results have been mixed. *Noah* made money but kicked up a firestorm of controversy with its departures from the Old Testament, while *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, an attempt to refashion the story of Moses as a *Gladiator*-style adventure, flopped.

"We're certainly always grateful for themes of redemption and faith in films," said Kendrick. "Where we have problem is when they take our most respected scripture and twist it in a way

that is at odds with our beliefs.”

Kendrick hopes that studios will take less artistic license with upcoming religious epics such as *Ben-Hur* and *Risen*, the story of a Roman centurion tasked with investigating reports of Jesus’ resurrection.

“We’re hopeful that these will be faithful to scripture or to the original story, and if they are, we will flock in droves,” he said.

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