

Star Power vs. Moral Content: What Should Hollywood Favor?

Studios want to make money, and they study all sorts of factors that impact the box office. Sadly, they sometimes miss the forest looking at the trees.

An Oct. 24 article in the *Hollywood Reporter* is headlined “Older Crowd Prefers Seasoned Stars at B.O.” The article makes the case that baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) are more inclined to come to a movie with a star they recognize, like Tom Hanks or Sandra Bullock.

Rentrak box-office analyst Paul Dergarabedian is quoted as saying, “Older audiences require a more substantive reason to see a movie than just a ‘wow’ factor or an effective trailer. Star power, while seemingly unimportant to younger moviegoers who appear to only care about concept, acts as sort of a movie insurance policy. A Hanks, Clooney or Bullock in a movie takes some of the risk out of the equation when older audiences make the decision to invest their time and money in a particular film.”

Whatever truth there is to this is dwarfed by the greater fact that all audiences, including older ones, prefer movies with strong moral content and minimal offensive material. Let’s look at Tom Hanks. Here are his most popular movies:

- *Toy Story 3* (2010), \$415 million (G)
- *Forrest Gump* (1994), \$329 million (PG-13)
- *Toy Story 2* (1999), \$245 million (G)

Here are his least popular:

- *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990), \$15 million (R)
- *Cloud Atlas* (2012), \$27 million (R)
- *Larry Crowne* (2011), \$36 million (PG-13)

People adore Tom Hanks as Woody in the Toy Story movies. His role in *Forrest Gump* was astounding. He played the honest, humble, kind patriot in a world full of immorality. His acting was brilliant. It was one of the most memorable roles in movie history. His roles like this are what win him fans. But his fans are appalled at movies like *Cloud Atlas*, with its politically correct message and foul content.

Now, let's look at Sandra Bullock. Here are her most popular movies:

- *The Blind Side* (2009), \$255 million (PG-13)
- *Gravity* (2013), \$206 million (PG-13)
- *The Proposal* (2009), \$163 million (PG-13)

Before *Gravity*, Bullock won an Academy Award and achieved her highest box office ratings and acclaim playing an admirable Christian woman from the South. Audiences loved her in that role.

This is nothing new.

Julie Andrews will forever be remembered as Maria in *The Sound of Music*. 20th Century Fox made a fortune with that movie, which is No. 3 on the all-time box office chart when adjusted for inflation. Audiences abandoned her for the awful character she played in *Star*. 20th Century Fox lost a fortune with that movie.

What will James Stewart always be remembered for? *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Gary Cooper will be remembered for *Sergeant York*, *Pride of the Yankees* and *High Noon*. Charlton Heston will be remembered for *The Ten Commandments*, where he played Moses leading the Jewish people to freedom, and *Ben Hur*, where he played an embittered hero who comes to Christ.

Admirable moral roles trump star power. They actually help make stars. Bad roles and offensive content shrink stars. They

destroy star power and Hollywood's bottom line.

Dergarabedian's final advice to the major studios is: "Know thy audience. Each age group responds differently to wildly divergent motivating factors. As the adult drama is having a resurgence, so are the older stars who are fueling the success of many of those films."

Despite what Rentrak's analyst says, the true fuel of the movie business is great moral stories well told—stories with spiritually uplifting, redemptive content. One of the great joys of moviegoers is to see an amazing actor like Tom Hanks play a truly great role.

Also, for example, moviegoers of all ages seem to adore Steve Carell as Gru in the *Despicable Me* cartoons. They didn't buy him, however, in *The Incredible Burt Wonderstone*, which was released just a few months before *Despicable Me 2* came out. Gru is a misfit criminal transformed into a devoted father by three little girls who pray for a family. Burt Wonderstone is a selfish, foul-mouthed show-off.

Tom Cruise was a huge hit in *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* and a few months later flopped royally as a vulgar, crazed rock star in *Rock of Ages*.

Star power is wasted when it's used on vulgar, undesirable characters. It makes box office history when it's used for admirable, moral characters in compelling, redemptive stories.