Why Oscar Contenders Bust at the Box Office

An indie film scene that barely registered a pulse all year finally showed flickers of life last weekend.

Spotlight, a hard-hitting drama about the Boston Globe's investigation of the Catholic Church sex abuse scandal, and *Brooklyn*, an elegiac period romance about an Irish woman adjusting to a new life in America, both opened respectably in limited release. The newspaper picture logged $295,009 across five theaters for a strong $59,002 per-screen average, while the immigrant drama posted a $187,281 from five venues, representing a solid per-screen average of $37,456.

The critical test will come in the coming weeks as the two films try to build on that momentum, slowly adding theaters with the hopes of attracting crowds over the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. If they are successful, *Spotlight* and *Brooklyn*, both of which are expected to be Best Picture contenders, will buck a worrying trend. This year, chasing Oscar gold is proving to be financially ruinous.

Already, pictures like *Truth*, a look at *60 Minutes'* investigation of George W. Bush's national guard record, and *99 Homes*, a drama about the mortgage foreclosure crisis, have flopped badly despite scoring respectful reviews.

They are joined in their struggles by the likes of gay rights drama *Freeheld*, the period piece *Suffragette*, and the cooking comedy *Burnt* with Bradley Cooper. *Beasts of No Nation*, a child soldiers drama from *True Detective*'s Cary Fukunaga, collapsed during its limited theatrical run, although the streaming service claims that viewers at home are watching the film in greater numbers.

These whiffs follow a summer that saw Sundance favorites like

Dope, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* and *Diary of a Teenage Girl* wilt at the multiplexes. Some of these films were mediocre, but the scale of the carnage in the awards-bait space is troubling. It raises questions about the commercial viability of challenging works of art made for adults.

“It’s such a crowded marketplace that it’s really hard to cut through the clutter and shine,” said Jason Cassidy, chief marketing officer at Open Road, the studio behind *Dope* and *Spotlight*. “A lot of pedigree films haven’t found their footing.”

A few specialty pictures have worked, such as *Woman in Gold* with Helen Mirren ($33.3 million) and *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* ($33.1 million), but the number of hits trails last year when films like *St. Vincent*, *Birdman*, *The Imitation Game* and *Wild* were able to turn critical affection into solid box office returns. Even then, last year’s crop of Oscar nominees caught flack for being little seen by the general public.

Prestige pictures from mainstream studios have also been battered. *Steve Jobs*, one of the most acclaimed pictures of the year, struck out in wide release. Last weekend, the picture was dropped from 2,000 theaters, an acknowledgement that the audience isn’t coming out for the biopic about the Apple founder.

Black Mass, a gangster drama that boasts Johnny Depp in a showboat role as Whitey Bulger, opened respectably, but has more or less wrapped up its domestic run with $62 million—not a great result for a picture that cost nearly as much to make. A 3D angle and a technically dazzling set-piece couldn’t get ticket-buyers to check out “The Walk,” the story of a tightrope stunt involving the Twin Towers. And political comedy *Our Brand Is Crisis*, which some Oscar watchers thought would propel Sandra Bullock back into the awards race, instead will go down as one of the actress’ biggest turkeys, making less than $6 million in two weeks of release.

In a piece in the *New York Times*, Michael Cieply and Brooks Barnes argue that the disappointing results this fall are a case of feast and famine. They contrast the outsized success of pictures like *Spectre* and *The Martian* with massive flops like *Pan*, believing the results signal that customers are either flocking to the multiplexes or steering clear altogether. In the process, these polar opposite reactions are squeezing out the mid-range hit.

Improvements in the size and quality of televisions, as well as the wealth of quality small-screen programming remain popular culprits. But some distribution executives believe there are other things at play. As evidence, they point to a presidential election that has elevated outsiders like Donald Trump and Ben Carson to front-runner status and given vent to screeds against illegal immigration, Wall Street malfeasance, and the worthlessness of the political classes. People are mad and dissatisfaction is the order of the day.

“I think society is depressed,” said one veteran distribution executive. “People do not want to see things that disturb them. The entertainment factor is critical right now. Audiences don’t want to feel like they’re being punished.”

Pictures like *Bridge of Spies* appear to be taking hold, the executive argues, because they present an optimistic view of humanity. Unlike in *Truth*, where journalistic errors lead to a discredited report, or *Steve Jobs*, a warts-and-all portrait of a prickly billionaire, the films that work are the ones where ordinary, decent people triumph.

Whether or not a national malaise is to blame, many studio executives are hoping that last weekend’s results signal a shift. They hope that *Spotlight* and *Brooklyn* are warmly received as they branch out beyond major cities like New York City and Los Angeles.

Perhaps it’s wishful thinking given that *The Martian* didn’t have a spillover effect, but studio executives believe that a few hit films lift the overall market. They attract crowds who see trailers and posters and are inspired to check out other movies. If that happens, it would be welcome news for upcoming arthouse pictures like *The Danish Girl* and *Carol*, to say nothing of more expensive, adult-oriented studio offerings such as “Concussion” with Will Smith and “The Revenant” with Leonardo DiCaprio.

“There could be an awakening as people realize that there all these great films out there,” said Frank Rodriguez, senior vice president of distribution at Fox Searchlight. “I think there could be a renaissance in these last few months.”

If things don’t get better soon, studios and producers might not be able to afford to be in the Oscar race. Awards are great, but money usually matters more. {eoa}