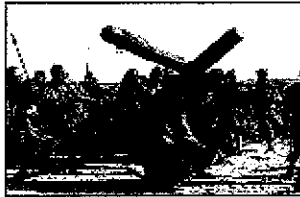


REUTERS  [Print this article](#)[Close This Window](#)

Zombies Push Jesus from Top of North American Box Office

Sun Mar 21, 2004 02:53 PM ET



By Dean Goodman

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - The combined might of Jesus and Mel Gibson was no match for a plague of ravenous zombies at the weekend box office in North America.

"Dawn of the Dead," a remake of George Romero's 1978 cult horror, grabbed the No. 1 slot in its first weekend by selling a better-than-expected \$27.3 million worth of tickets, according to studio estimates issued on Sunday.

The film, which cost about \$26 million to make, is set largely in a deserted shopping mall where a small group led by Sarah Polley and Ving Rhames must defend themselves from masses of bloodthirsty subhumans infected by a mysterious virus. It was released by Universal Pictures, a unit of Vivendi Universal SA .

Many prognosticators had expected "Dawn of the Dead" to open near \$20 million, and thus vie for honors with "The Passion of the Christ," the leader for the last three weekends. In the end, writer/director/producer Gibson's biblical epic earned \$19.2 million, propelling its total to \$295.3 million.

The crime thriller "Taking Lives," starring Angelina Jolie as an FBI profiler, opened at No. 3 with \$11.4 million. The top three movies were all R-rated (no children under 17 without a parent or adult guardian), a rare occurrence when marketing restrictions have forced studios to tone down the sex and violence in order to reach a wider audience.

CARREY SHINES 'ETERNAL'

The top 10 contained one other new release. "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," a quirky romance starring Jim Carrey in a rare dramatic role, opened at No. 6 with \$8.6 million. The film played in half the theaters the other two rookies did in hopes of garnering good word of mouth from aficionados of its screenwriter, Charlie Kaufman,

the scribe behind "Being John Malkovich" and "Adaptation."

Rounding out the top 10, "Starsky & Hutch" slipped one place to No. 4 with \$10.7 million in its third weekend, taking the haul for the hit cop comedy to \$67.8 million. The Johnny Depp thriller "Secret Window" fell three places to No. 5 with \$9.6 million for a 10-day haul of \$33.1 million.

"The Passion of the Christ" was released by Newmarket Films, a unit of closely held Newmarket Capital Group.

"Taking Lives" and "Starsky & Hutch" were released by Warner Bros. Pictures, a unit of Time Warner Inc. "Secret Window" was released by Columbia Pictures, a unit of Sony Corp. "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" was released by Vivendi Universal's Focus Features.

Overall sales rose, according to tracking firm Exhibitor Relations. The top 12 films grossed \$110 million, up 5 percent from last weekend, and up 33 percent from the year-ago period, when "Bringing Down the House" was the top film.

The three newcomers attracted disparate sets of moviegoers, with "Dawn of the Dead" pulling in young males, "Taking Lives" older females, and "Eternal Sunshine" an upscale crowd in the 17-35 range.

Universal's challenge with "Dawn of the Dead" was to make a movie that was scary enough without being mind-numbing, said Adam Fogelson, the studio's president of marketing. First-time feature filmmaker Zack Snyder incorporated "a bunch of really fun, great moments" to lighten the atmosphere, he added.

"Taking Lives," which cost in the \$40 million range, hopes to draw spring break crowds in the coming weeks, said Dan Fellman, president of distribution at Warner Bros. Jolie has lost some of her box office appeal with such recent efforts as "Beyond Borders" and the "Lara Croft" movies.

"Eternal Sunshine" played to sellout evening crowds, which bodes well for its future, said Focus Features distribution president Jack Foley.

© Copyright Reuters 2004. All rights reserved. Any copying, re-publication or re-distribution of Reuters content or of any content used on this site, including by framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without prior written consent of Reuters.

Quotes and other data are provided for your personal information only, and are not intended for trading purposes. Reuters, the members of its Group and its data providers shall not be liable for any errors or delays in the quotes or other data, or for any actions taken in reliance thereon.

© Reuters 2004. All rights reserved. Republication or redistribution of Reuters content, including by caching, framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Reuters. Reuters and the Reuters sphere logo are registered trademarks and trademarks of the Reuters group of companies around the world.

Close This Window