

TV Goes for Big Bucks on Big Screen

'Get Smart' Is the Latest in a Line of Small Screen Flicks

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Producer Andrew Lazar is feeling the pressure



His latest project, an \$80 million update of the 1960s Mel Brooks TV comedy "Get Smart," opened in theaters last Friday.

It was expected to open big, what with the films all-star cast — Steve Carrell plays bumbling agent Maxwell Smart, while Anne Hathaway is sleek and chic as Agent 99 — and a built-in audience. And open big it did -- "Get Smart" got the bulk of movie goers in its debut weekend, bringing in \$39.2M.



"The pressure is definitely there with any big budget film," Lazar said. "But with something as recognizable as 'Get Smart,' it goes above and beyond that. There are a lot of expectations for its success. I'm feeling it."

"Get Smart" is the latest in a line of big-budget blockbusters based on TV shows. Considering the failure of recent big-budget adaptations like "Speed Racer" — and the success of others like "Sex and the City" and "The Incredible Hulk," the trend could go either way.

And there's more to come. Hollywood has a whole slate of TV movies lined up. Nostalgic for an '80s action hero? Check out the soon-to-be-in-theaters "A-Team." Still mourning the loss of "Arrested Development?" No worries — the whole cast is signing on for Ron Howard's 2009 adaptation of the sketch comedy show.

Just this year, we've seen "Speed Racer," "Sex and the City" and "The Incredible Hulk." And there's still the "X-Files" and "High School Musical" movies coming. So why are we seeing so much TV at the movies? Is it nostalgia? The built-in audience? Easily adaptable characters?

Movie money expert Gitesh Pandya notes that there's a sort of emotional shorthand involved in adapting a TV show — or any existing material, really — to the big screen.

"Hollywood studios have always been trying to minimize risk by making films with a built-in audience whether they be sequels, remakes, or adaptations of TV shows, books, comics, video games, musicals and even Disney theme park rides," said Pandya, who runs the Web site BoxOfficeGuru.com. "Most TV-related motion pictures are based on older shows that are trying to reach a new generation — take 'Mission: Impossible' or 'Bewitched' — or on current or recent programs that tap into an existing fan base, like the 'X-Files' or 'Sex and the City.'"

These days, said "Get Smart's" Lazar, the marketing comes before the script.

"The obvious answer is branding," said Lazar, whose production house, Mad Chance, is also working on a "Welcome Back, Kotter" remake for 2009. "With big budget movies, you just can't take the risk anymore. And one way to minimize the risk is to start with something recognizable. But you have to be strategic. I don't think every TV title can transition seamlessly to film."

Case in point — last month's "Speed Racer." The highly anticipated Wachowski brothers remake of the 1960s anime series cost \$120 million, but bombed at the box office with a meager \$96 million worldwide.

But with "Get Smart," Lazar hopes the timing is right.

"'Get Smart' was a satire on the Cold War, and it's just as relevant and satirical today, in light of Iraq," he said. "But we can't just transfer a '60s comedy to the big screen. You have to hit all the bases. There's a currency, a cultural relevance. There's the built-in audience, so you have to walk a fine line of being reverential to the show, but not at the expense of the movie."

Plus, he added, there's the segment of the movie-going audience that's never heard of the TV show.

"You have to make it its own thing, because there are generations of people who have never seen the original. So the pitch was a film that's 'Bourne Identity' as a comedy," he said. "It's got that built-in audience because Maxwell Smart is a recognizable brand, but there's still something worth watching for people who don't know the brand."

In the case of the "X-files" update, which hits theaters July 25, producers had to walk a very fine line.

"When we went to ComicCon to premiere the film's trailer, there were 4,500 very vocal people waiting to see it," said the film's co-writer and producer Frank Spotnitz. "It was shocking, but it just goes to prove that the audience is still there, waiting. There's still much good will toward the show and the characters, how could we not do a movie?"

Since announcing the "X-files" movie, X-philes (yes, they're still out there) have watched the production's every move.

"But we're used to it," Spotnitz said. "We always had a broad array of reactions from the fans, even when the show was on the air, because we heard from them on the Internet every day. I'm sure they'll have a lot to say about this one."

But Spotnitz, like Lazar, won't overlook the audience that's not familiar with the show.

"The movie has to be able to stand on its own," he said of TV remakes. "You can't simply rely on a built-in audience, especially because someone's going to be cranky, no matter what."

So why all the remakes now?

"I think the business is cyclical and there are waves of similar films," said BoxOfficeGuru's Pandya. "This summer we have a bunch of films based on TV shows. The last two summers were filled with sequels. And the summer of 2005 was packed with remakes and adaptations with hardly any sequels. So these waves will continue to come and go. I think the ones that succeed are the ones that can tap into a pre-existing property but also bring something new to the table like a big star, a pivotal story, or updated special effects."

With the "X-files," Spotnitz said, "the timing was just happenstance. They came to us while we were doing the show, but we were so busy. Then they called again after it ended, but we were just so tired. And then they reached out again about six years ago, but it kept getting stalled. When things finally fell into place last year, everything came together really quickly."

And while he won't reveal whether Mulder and Scully finally get together, he will admit that if the film meets box office expectations, "We'd like to keep on doing them. But we looked at it as maybe this is the last time we'd get to see these characters. And so we owe it to the fans to give them something worth the ticket price."

Which is what it's all about.

"At the end of the day, there is no true formula to succeeding with a movie based on a TV show. All the other rules still apply," Pandya said. "You need a well-made film, excitement in the marketplace and strong marketing. The month of May showed us how it can go right — 'Sex and the City' — and how it could go wrong — 'Speed Racer.' You still have to target your audience and deliver something worth leaving home for and paying 10 bucks for at a multiplex."

So will "Get Smart" be worth the 10 bucks? "Talk to me on Monday," said a frazzled Lazar. "I'll let you know how it goes."

That \$39.2M opening weekend should ease his nerves.