Arts & Life

An uber-successful box-office summer: How did this happen?

By LUCA RATHGEBER
Contributing Writer

For over a century, going to the movie theater has been a prominent, worldwide pastime. From silents, wartime escapism and the rise of summer blockbusters, a physical trip to the theater replicates a feeling like no other. Unfortunately, the rise of streaming services and the price jump for theater tickets have steered away many individuals and families from making that trip.

However, this past summer saw something different — $4.76 billion in revenue from theaters. Films like "The Odyssey," "Spider-Man: Brand New Day" and "Toy Story 5," have attracted an unprecedented number of theater-goers, at least compared to trends from past years.

COVID-19 is a huge reason to blame. Even after theaters re-opened post-pandemic, they struggled to re-gain traction; big-budget blockbusters like "Tenet" and "The Suicide Squad" lost millions. Reasonably, we could attribute this to a rise in streaming, as the lockdowns provided home-theater experiences that some believe beat the real thing.

But what about those, albeit fewer, who do prefer the theater experience? What is it that keeps these folks from coming back?

Quinnipiac Film professor Nathaniel Lacelle-Peterson is a resident of New York City, so he's no stranger to the art-house cinemas, film festivals and premium viewing formats, such as IMAX and 35MM. Lacelle-Peterson talked about the impact movie marketing has had on these trends. While discussing the nature of this past summer's success, he posed a question.

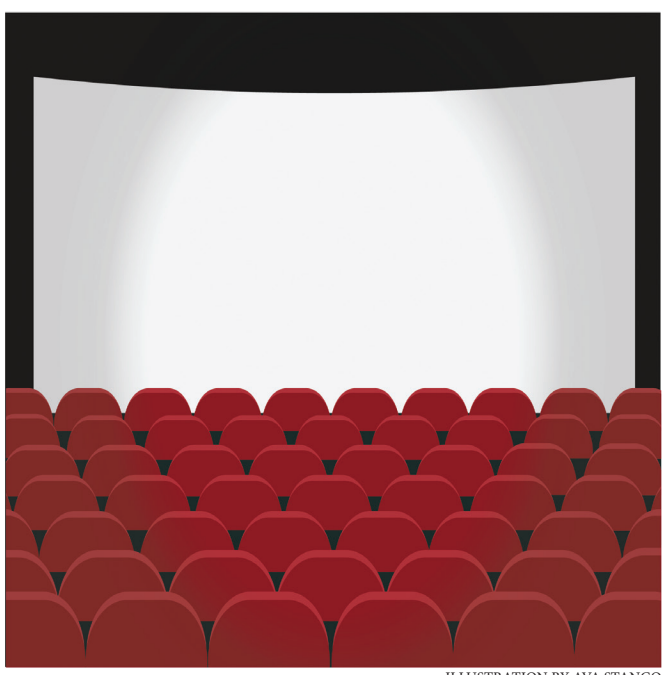

ILLUSTRATION BY AVA STANGO

"Are they being promoted differently?" Lacelle-Peterson said.

This is a valid question. Is there something about the marketing, something different in comparison to other years, that helped these films reach more people?

Movie marketing is so crucial to a film's success because without it, your film is unknown. Undoubtedly, one of the biggest mediums for film marketing is social media. Love it or hate it, the impact it has on movie promotion is undeniable. Creators on platforms like TikTok and YouTube can post reviews that reach and influence millions. Therefore, users can see this content and be more inclined to see a film if a trusted creator, by their standards, likes it, and vice versa.

But, I digress. The marketing is uberly important to a film's success. However, what about the actual film? What types of films keep audiences coming back?

"(There's a difference in) buying a ticket to a movie vs an experience," Lacelle-Peterson said.

While technically an opinion, there is some merit here; people love movie experiences. A common theme with the highest-grossing films of this past summer was the availability of premium formats, specifically IMAX. Both "The Odyssey" and "Spider-Man: Brand New Day" had prominent IMAX presences. For example, "The Odyssey" collected 30% of its revenue from IMAX screenings. It seems that viewers are yearning for, and prioritizing the viewing experience over outside factors like ticket prices.

To continue on this analysis of the theater experience, if you look at any Variety article listing the highest-grossing movies of all time, you'll see big-budget blockbusters like "Avatar" and "Avengers." These movies had major cultural impacts and reeled in massive audiences due to the idea of the "cinema of attractions." "Avatar" had innovative CGI, while "Avengers: Infinity War" and "Avengers: Endgame" brought together world-renowned, iconic characters. However, when talking about blockbusters with major cultural impacts, the Barbenheimer phenomenon must be mentioned.

For a brief background, Barbenheimer refers to the cultural phenomenon where theater-goers would complete a double feature of director Greta Gerwig's "Barbie" and director Christopher Nolan's "Oppenheimer." The trend of "dressing up" for "Barbie" went viral on various social platforms, as theaters were flooded with people in pink.

But let's relate this back to this past summer. The biggest film, "The Odyssey," was the highest-grossing, at roughly $1.7 billion. What's interesting with this one was the promotion. Months before the film even premiered, still shots were released, causing a stir and brewing massive anticipation.

"(The significance of) people having a different sense of attachment, sense of following a star, relationship to figure," Lacelle-Peterson said.

Building on the idea of "the cinema of attractions," "The Odyssey" had a huge ensemble cast. The fact that two-time Academy Award winner Nolan was directing already drew in oodles of attention. The copious amount of star power connected to the film built a level of both anticipation and expectation that was rare to see. Other films in that summer slate, like "Spider-Man: Brand New Day," possessed a similar star power, with actor Tom Holland and actress Zendaya leading the film.

Strong social media-driven promotion, presence of the "cinema of attractions," and an increased desire for premium formatting all led to a summer at the box office that shocked us all. Whilst the fall slates usually provide less revenue, the trends seen with this past summer suggest reason for higher expectations. Epics like "Dune: Part III" and "Avengers: Doomsday" hope to follow these trends and bring this monumental year for theaters to an exciting close.

NFL fines have gone too far

By REX NAYLOR
Staff Writer

Football fields have become one of the most regulated stages in all of sport in recent years. Despite its rigid structure, players use the field for self-expression and as a playground for some of the most creative celebrations in sports.

Despite childlike creativity coming from grown men, tension has grown between the NFL and the players' association. Year after year, the league enforces stricter rulebooks regarding standards and unsportsmanlike conduct, including celebrations.

There's a clear clash between corporate branding and personal narratives every Thursday, Sunday and Monday night. According to the current league regulations, violations of uniform standards and unauthorized personal messages carry fines as little as $5,900.

The violations are rarely out of defiance, but rather bits and pieces of players' personal lives breaking out onto the gridiron. Names like former New York Giants wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr., former Chicago Bears wide receiver Brandon Marshall, former Pittsburgh Steelers cornerback William Gay and former Baltimore Ravens wide receiver DeAndre Hopkins all wore custom shoes, which resulted in fines.

A few of them wore shoes for valiant causes like mental health awareness, domestic abuse awareness and cancer research. The reason for the fines was that none of these were pre-approved by the league before being worn.

Touchdown and turnover celebrations have turned from high fives to full choreographed dance numbers. Before the season started, the NFL made a commercial featuring Indianapolis Colts safety Camryn Bynum as the "NFL celly coordinator."

Eye black has been used to relay personal statements such as faith-based declarations and social justice messages. Houston Texans linebacker Azeez Al-Shaair put the names of Palestinian girls who were killed by Israeli strikes across his cheeks during each game this season.

Al-Shaair was fined after the first game, took off the name of a different girl during the second game to continue playing and wore a third girl's name during the third game before exiting with an injury.

What is above makes some sense, even if it seems silly. Fining players for expression on cleats and equipment when the NFL has time set aside for that reason isn't out of the question.

Players are more than athletes in the NFL, and they should be able to express their beliefs causes however they want.

What doesn't make much sense is the NFL fining players for celebrations for products they promote. In week three, San Francisco 49ers fullback Kyle Juszczyk was fined $15,000 for doing his signature celebration.

He is known as "Juice," as his actual name sounds vaguely similar and is hard for most fans to pronounce. He put his hand up to his facemask, his pinky and thumb sticking out as the crowd yelled "Juice."

He's been in the league for 14 years and has done the celebration dozens of times without a single penalty or fine.

The NFL's reasoning said, "Your imitation of chugging a beer constituted an offensive demonstration and could reasonably be construed as being in poor taste."

It's worth mentioning that Bud Light is the official beer sponsor of the NFL, and Juszczyk doesn't drink beer at all. Keep in mind who the largest target demographic is; it's middle-aged white men, also one of the largest demographics for drinking beer.

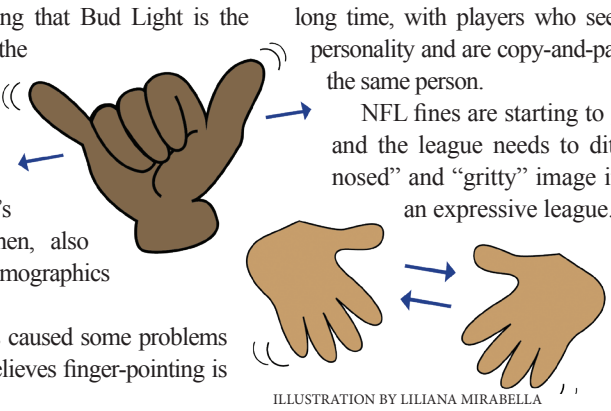

ILLUSTRATION BY LILIANA MIRABELLA

Pointing fingers has caused some problems as well, as the NFL believes finger-pointing is too close to promoting gun use.

Every week, there are fines that don't make sense and take the fun out of the game, and fans complain about it no matter what. What makes the NFL so special for players and fans is the creative outlets players use to express themselves.

Whether it be one-of-one-designed cleats, choreographed celebratory dances or signature celebrations, everyone in the NFL wins when players can have some fun and freedom.

What makes the entertainment worse is restricting what NFL players can do. No one wants to watch a sport where players can't do or say anything. The NHL is a perfect example of what the NFL shouldn't become.

The NHL has had an image problem for a long time, with players who seem to have no personality and are copy-and-paste versions of the same person.

NFL fines are starting to get ridiculous, and the league needs to ditch the "hard-nosed" and "gritty" image it once had for an expressive league.