'Avatar' wins box office, nears domestic record

JAKE COYLE - AP Entertainment Writer - Associated Press

"Avatar" is on the cusp of toppling the domestic box-office record after leading all movies for a seventh straight week.

James Cameron's 3-D epic earned $30 million over the weekend, and its domestic total reached $594.5 million, according to studio estimates Sunday. That puts the film only about $6 million behind the domestic record set by Cameron's "Titanic" in 1998 with $600.8 million.

Earlier this week, the 20th Century Fox blockbuster passed "Titanic" for the worldwide box-office record. It has now crossed the $2 billion worldwide mark with $2.039 billion, easily beating the $1.8 billion made by "Titanic."

"You have to do a double take when you see these numbers," said Paul, Dergarabedian, box-office analyst for Hollywood.com, marveling that "Avatar" decreased only 14 percent from the previous weekend. "James Cameron is the king of the box office hold."

So close to the domestic box-office record, "Avatar" could pass "Titanic," interestingly enough, on Tuesday — when Oscar nominations are announced. The film is expected to be nominated for best picture, as well as numerous other categories.

Those nominations could mean an Oscar bump for "Avatar," further propelling its gross.

Whereas the sustained box-office performance of "Titanic" has typically been attributed to teenage girls seeing the film repeatedly, the demographics for "Avatar" are less clear. One draw for repeat business is surely the 3-D visual effects.

"It's everybody going repeatedly," said Dergarabedian. "At first it was more of a fanboy experience, and then the word got out."

Analysts believe the lengthy run from "Avatar" is likely hurting the business of other films.

Mel Gibson's revenge-thriller "Edge of Darkness," debuted this weekend with $17.1 million for Warner Bros., a respectable if slightly low total. Dan Fellman, head of distribution at Warner Bros., called it a "solid opening."

"On a normal weekend, we probably would have had the number one film," said Fellman, shrugging at the out-of-this-world competition from "Avatar."

"Edge of Darkness" had been widely seen as a test to whether Gibson can return to

headlining a film, after eight years and damage to his image. The last movie he starred in was "Signs" in 2002. Four years later, he made anti-Semitic remarks during a drunken-driving arrest.

But "Darkness" has received mostly good reviews. Fellman said the studio's data showed approximately 70 percent of those seeing the film said they came to see Gibson.

"It certainly marks an interesting return for Mel Gibson," said Fellman. "When this film plays out, I think his star will shine a little brighter."

Also in its first weekend of release was "When in Rome," the Walt Disney romantic comedy starring Kristen Bell. It took in $12.1 million.

Many films will hope for a box-office boost from the Academy Awards after nominations are announced Tuesday morning. The Oscar effect, though, may be slightly different this year, since the academy has expanded best picture nominees from five to ten.

Estimated ticket sales for Friday through Sunday at U.S. and Canadian theaters, according to Media By Numbers LLC. Final figures will be released Monday.

1. "Avatar," $30 million.

2. "Edge of Darkness," $17.1 million.

3. "When in Rome," $12.1 million.

4. "The Tooth Fairy," $10 million.

5. "The Book of Eli," $8.8 million.

6. "Legion," $6.8 million.

7. "The Lovely Bones," $4.7 million.

8. "Sherlock Holmes," $4.5 million.

9. "Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Squeakquel," $4 million.

10. "It's Complicated," $3.7 million.

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