Super Saban: Young distributor takes it slow and steady with nimble release strategy

Description

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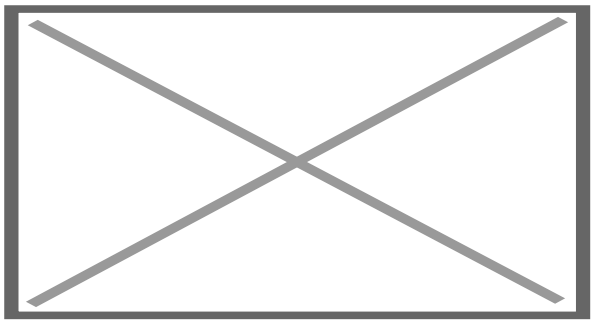

Itâ??s the year 2017, and a one-size-fits-all approach to movie distribution just plain doesnâ??t work anymoreâ?¦if it ever did. Outside of your major studio releasesâ??superheroes, explosions, giant robots, probably a third act where a giant sky portal opens up, you know the drillâ??there are dozens of mid-level films every month competing for limited audience attention and even more limited theatre space. Barring millions upon millions to spend on advertising costs, how do you compete? How do you stay afloat when thereâ??s a glut of content and your average moviegoer only gets out to the theatre a handful of times per year? Itâ??s a tough road, but Saban Films has figured out a way to walk it.

Launched in mid-2014, Saban Films is an acquisition and distribution outfit set up under the umbrella of Saban Capital Group, which in turn is run by billionaire producer Haim Saban. Even before getting into the distribution business, the Saban name was a big one in the entertainment industry. Saban brands include the Japanese franchises â??Digimonâ?• and â??Mighty Morphin Power Rangers,â?• the latter of which has a big-budget film adaptation slated for this March through Lionsgate.

Saban Films, clarifies president Bill Bromiley, has nothing to do with *Power Rangers*, which is the result of a partnership between Lionsgate and Sabanâ??s brands division. In fact, Saban Films has its own partnership with Lionsgate, with which it releases in the neighborhood of ten to twelve films a year. That

slate runs the genre gamutâ??from westerns (*The Homesman*) to fish-out-of-water drama (*A Hologram for the King*) to blood â??nâ?? guts horror (*31*). Itâ??s a diverse lineup, and one that results from Bromileyâ??s curatorial approach to film acquisition. Simply put: quality over quantity.



Saban Films President, Bill Bromiley (Photo via Saban Films)

â??Weâ??re not about trying to create a library of titles. Weâ??re trying to create a library of *quality* titles,â?• he explains. There has to be a â??cast, director or story that is appealing to each film.â?• To that end, a key component of Saban Filmsâ?? strategy is going after films with â??A-list talent,â?• whether itâ??s Tom Hanks in *A Hologram for the King* or Tommy Lee Jones, Hilary Swank and Meryl Streep in *The Homesman*. â??In the case of, say, *A Hologram for the King*, even if that doesnâ??t work theatrically, you still have a Tom Hanks film,â?• Bromiley explains. Thatâ??s a far easier sell in ancillary markets than even a well-regarded indie with no real household names to speak of. To that end, upcoming Saban releases feature the talents of Forest Whitaker and Eric Bana (*The Forgiven*), Al Pacino (*Hangman*), John Cusack (*Misfortune*) and Glenn Close (*The Girl with All the Gifts*).

Sabanâ??s decision to attach itself to quality talent extends to behind the camera as well as in front of it. John Michael McDonagh, director of critical hits *The Guard* and *Calvary,* helmed Sabanâ??s pitch-black comedy *War on Everyone*, starring Alexander SkarsgÃ¥rd and Michael PeÃ±a as a pair of corrupt New Mexico cops. That one debuts on DirecTV in the first quarter of 2017 in advance of a theatrical release*. A Hologram for the King* had Tom Tykwer, previously of *Run Lola Run* and *Cloud Atlas* (with the Wachowski sisters), in the directorâ??s chair, while Tommy Lee Jones himself directed and co-wrote *The Homesman*. In production now is *The Forgiven*, starring Forest Whitaker as anti-apartheid activist Desmond Tutu and directed by Roland JoffÃ©, two-time Oscar nominee for *The Mission* and*The Killing Fields*.

Up-and-comers are in the mix, too. Zack Whedon, whose writing credits include â??Southland,â?• â??Halt and Catch Fireâ?• and *Dr. Horribleâ??s Sing-Along Blog* (directed by brother Joss), made his directorial debut with 2016 Saban release *Come and Find Me*, starring Aaron Paul and Annabelle Wallis. And early 2017 brings *The Girl with All the Gifts*, from director Colm McCarthy (TVâ??s â??Peaky Blindersâ?•). An â??elevated genre film,â?• to use Bromileyâ??s phrase, *The Girl with All the Gifts* was adapted by Mike Carey from his own novel about the state of the post-zombie apocalypse world. One difference from your typical â??Walking Deadâ?• fare: *The Girl with All the Gifts* is told from the perspective of a young girl named Melanie (Sennia Nanua) who is herself a zombie (or â??hungryâ?•), albeit one who is mysteriously able to talk and form attachments and boasts a genius-level IQ. That film, out on DirecTV on Jan. 26 in advance of a theatrical/VOD bow on Feb. 24, is the one that Bromiley estimates heâ??s gotten â??more calls aboutâ?¦than anything since weâ??ve started. We bought into it early on, which is our strategy. I would say that half of the product that we buy and distribute, weâ??re onboard early. That can be a pre-buy off a script, it can be during production, or it can be during post-production.â?•

Bromiley admits that, being a genre film*, The Girl with All the Gifts* is something of a â??trickyâ?• release. â??The horror space is really, really difficult, unless you can spend $20 million-plus in P&A. If you want to be in that game, you canâ??t do it on one title. You need to make it a business. You have to have four or five titles and go to bat multiple times, like Jason Blum [of Blumhouse Productions] does.â?• But â??trickyâ?• doesnâ??t deter Saban, which prides itself on eschewing a fixed method of film distribution in favor of a more tailored approach. â??Each film we treat individually, and thatâ??s the allure of us,â?• Bromiley explains. â??We have to be flexible in our distribution strategies.â?•

Though every Saban Films release goes out theatrically â??in a minimum of ten markets,â?• the majority of its business comes from premium VOD; Bromiley estimates an 80/20 split. All the same, â??personally, I think that the theatrical business, regardless of whether itâ??s Saban product or not, is going to be around forever,â?• he argues. â??I think that is the driving force of our business, and it will continue to be the driving force.â?•

Though a longtime proponent of premium VODâ??Bromiley got into that game early at Image Entertainment (now RLJ Entertainment) before moving over to Sabanâ??heâ??s skeptical of its applicability to big studio releases. â??There are a lot of things youâ??ve got to do to get a consumer to want to pay that kind of money at home for the movies theyâ??re talking aboutâ?•â??weâ??re probably looking at around $50 per movie, if the big studiosâ?? occasional feints into the premium VOD landscape ever take offâ??â??and you also lose the experience of seeing the movies in the theatre.â?• Saban, being a mid-range distributor, is more â??flexibleâ?• in terms of pursuing premium VOD (today defined as a VOD release going day-and-date with theatrical), but that doesnâ??t mean theatrical

isnâ??t a vital component of their release strategy.

For an example of Saban Filmsâ?? outside-the-box thinking regarding theatrical exhibition, take a look at their strategy for *31*, from horror stalwart Rob Zombie (*House of 1000 Corpses*, *The Devilâ??s Rejects*). Horror might be tough to break into, but â??Robâ??s a brand, and we knew that.â?• So prior to *31*â??s premium VOD release, Saban Films partnered with Fathom Events for a limited theatrical engagement on 400 or so screens. â??It did real revenueâ??like $750,000 in one night, one stream,â?• Bromiley recalls. â??We ended up doing an encore presentation as wellâ?¦ Exhibitors were happy. We were happy. It was creative, it was different. Weâ??re constantly trying to milk the most we can out of these films, and we always have the theatrical distributor in mind while doing so.â?•

In the future, Saban Films plans do more *31*-type event releases, with the caveat that â??you canâ??t just throw any old film into an event like that. It has to have a hook.â?• Outside of that, Bromiley plans for slow and steady growth for Saban: â??Weâ??re going to be very cautious. We donâ??t want to necessarily jump into the wide-release theatrical business right away, because thatâ??s very risky and puts you out of business quickly. I see part of our growth coming from the theatrical world and doing smaller platform releases.â?• After all, one big misstepâ??a large investment in a film that doesnâ??t end up delivering, an overzealous P&A spendâ??could have huge financial repercussions. Do not pass go, do not collect $200. Saban Films is only a year and a half old, and Bromiley is determined to stay in the game by applying pinpoint strategy.

(Source: filmjournal.com)

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Date Created

December 31, 2016
Author
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