Video Revenue Is Still Rising

By PETER M. NICHOLS

The factors that restrict the economy don't have too tight a grip on home video. While 2003 movie box-office receipts are down by more than 4 percent from last year, video revenue is up by 16 percent, according to a report by Video Business magazine. In the first half of the year consumers spent $10.2 billion buying and renting DVD's and videocassettes, a healthy performance for an industry that some analysts once wrote off as road kill on the supposed fast lane to the information superhighway.

Movies routinely make more money (sometimes twice as much) on video than in theaters: "8 Mile," starring the rapper Eminem, earned $117 million at the box office and $130 million on DVD and cassette; "Drumline" $56.4 million and $84.7 million, respectively; "Barbershop" $76 million and $102 million; "One Hour Photo" $31.6 million and $72.6 million.

A major reason of course is DVD. Close to half the households in the United States have DVD players. Many more have VCR's, but the smaller DVD universe has an impact beyond its numbers.

"The first people in on a new technology are always the most active participants," said Scott Hettrick, editor of Video Business. "The first 50 percent disproportionately represent the lion's share of all buying and renting on home video."

Video Business reported that $4.8 billion has been spent buying DVD's so far in 2003, as opposed to $1.05 billion purchasing videocassettes. On the rental side DVD also has taken the lead over the cassette. The studios have priced discs low for sales, but not everyone wants to buy most movies. "The single biggest change this year is the surge in DVD rentals," Mr. Hettrick said. "At first with the prices so much less on DVD everybody dove in and bought everything, but now people are turning back to more typical habits and renting titles they don't want to watch many times."

Mr. Hettrick doesn't expect as much sales activity from the next 50 million DVD households. "DVD sales for the next several years will continue to outpace rentals, but it will be more of a balance," he said.

As DVD proceeds into the mainstream, movie selections broaden, with romantic comedies, family films and serious drama sliding in with the action fare that has dominated DVD since the early days.

Many of these films rent as well as they sell on DVD. Take "One Hour Photo," with Robin Williams as a clerk in a photo shop who develops an obsession with a customer and her family.

Of the $72.6 million that the film has made on DVD and cassette since its release in February, about $51 million has been from rental. Of that, $28 million has been for DVD rental and $23 million for cassette.

Mr. Hettrick said that it would take a couple of years, but that the era of the cassette was ending. Studios are eliminating stocks of older films on VHS, and they are beginning to squeeze out new films as well.

"We're already seeing some titles coming out only on DVD," he said.

New Video Releases
Nicholas Nickleby

Rather than trying to update or interpret Charles Dickens's populous third novel, Douglas McGrath's film exhibits enthusiasm for it and enlists a fine collection of actors in the enterprise. On their uppers, the 19-year-old Nicholas (Charlie Hunnam) and his family travel to London to seek help from sadistic Uncle Ralph (Christopher Plummer). Ralph's response is to arrange a teaching position for Nicholas at a "school" where children are flogged bloody and to offer up Nicholas's sister, Kate (Romola Garai), to a lecherous old toad, Sir Mulberry Hawk (Edward Fox).

If great chunks of the book are jettisoned, the result makes "two hours of swift, engaging entertainment," A. O. Scott wrote in The New York Times.

2002. MGM. VHS, $39.98; DVD, $26.98. 126 minutes. PG.

Read My Lips

Beneath the mousy facade of a partially deaf office worker named Carla (Emmanuelle Devos) sits a quiet, volcanic fury, one of many surprising satisfactions in Jacques Audiard's film. Allowed to take on an ex-convict (Vincent Cassel) as an assistant, she finds one person she can dominate. But then a workplace comedy, albeit with darker, more complex overtones, turns into a violent, clammy caper film when the assistant is dragged back into the thug life. "Throughout, Mr. Audiard's direction is fluid and quick" (Scott).


Spun

Every time a speed freak snorts a line of crystal methedrine in Jonas Akerlund's film, the camera zeroes in on an eyeball spinning like a pinwheel in a wind storm. Set in the shabby flatlands of the North Los Angeles valley, "Spun" invites you to regard the spectacular squalor of its characters' lives with a smirking condescension. Spider Mike (John Leguizamo) shares hallucinations with his sex-crazed wreck of a girlfriend, Cookie (Mena Suvari) while the Cook (Mickey Rourke) runs the motel-room speed factory. If the movie doesn't glamorize the world it surveys, it still "exudes a kind of doomy charisma" (Stephen Holden).


The Life of David Gale

As the title character, Kevin Spacey turns martyr as a downtrodden professor, activist and drunk who sits on a death row in Texas after his conviction for killing an associate (Laura Linney). There he grants three interviews to the reporter Bitsey Bloom (Kate Winslet), who starts out tough and skeptical but gradually is won over by her subject, who has been railroaded. Mr. Spacey's stylized brooding establishes Gale as a character, but Alan Parker's film succumbs to its "crude, bullying narrative" (Elvis Mitchell).

2003. Universal. VHS, $74.99; DVD, $26.98. 130 minutes. R.

Straight to Video

Other new titles of interest, some of which may have had a theater release, appeared on television or been on videocassette or DVD in earlier editions.

THE AMERICAN FILM THEATER BOX SET NO. 2. Five films from the group of 14 put together by Ely Landau: "A Delicate Balance" (1973, 133 minutes), directed by Tony Richardson, adapted from Edward Albee's play, with Paul Scofield and Katharine Hepburn; "In Celebration" (1975, 131 minutes), directed by Lindsay Anderson, adapted from David Storey's play; with Brian Cox and Alan Bates; "The Homecoming" (1973, 111
minutes), directed by Peter Hall, based on Harold Pinter's play, with Vivien Merchant and Ian Holm; "The Man in the Glass Booth," (1975, 117 minutes), directed by Arthur Hiller, adapted from Robert Shaw's play, with Maxmillian Schel; "Three Sisters" (1970, 165 minutes), directed by Lawrence Olivier and John Sichel, adapted from Chekhov's play, with Jeanne Watts, Joan Plowright, Derek Jacobi. Myriad interviews and extras on DVD. Kino. VHS, $119.95; DVD, $119.95.

THE BILLY WILDER DVD COLLECTION. "The Apartment" (1960, 125 minutes), with Jack Lemmon, Shirley MacLaine; "Avanti!" (1972, 144 minutes), with Lemmon, Juliet Mills, Clive Revill; "The Fortune Cookie" (1966, 125 minutes), with Lemmon, Walter Matthau; "Irma la Douce" (1963, 142 minutes), with Lemmon, Ms. MacLaine, Lou Jacobi; "Kiss Me, Stupid" (1964, 126 minutes), with Dean Martin, Kim Novak; "One, Two, Three" (1961, 108 minutes), with James Cagney. Arlene Francis; "The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes" (1970, 125 minutes), with Robert Stephens, Colin Blakely; "Some Like It Hot" (1959, 119 minutes), with Lemmon, Tony Curtis, Marilyn Monroe; "Witness for the Prosecution" (1957, 114 minutes), with Marlene Dietrich, Charles Laughton, Tyrone Power. MGM. $129.96.