3-D Helps Propel ‘Monsters’ Success

LOS ANGELES — Consider DreamWorks Animation validated in its chest-thumping about a new golden era for 3-D.

“Monsters vs. Aliens,” positioned by the studio and its distributor, Paramount Pictures, as a make-or-break moment for digital 3-D, sold an estimated $58.2 million in tickets at North American theaters over the weekend, according to Media by Numbers, a box-office tracking firm. It’s the biggest opening so far of the year. But a deeper look at the numbers indicates that 3-D is the story.

The movie opened on 7,000 screens, including Imax screens, of which only 2,100 were equipped with 3-D technology. About 56 percent of the movie’s weekend total came from those limited 3-D screenings, according to Paramount, and they carried premium prices of up to $4 atop the standard admission. So about 30 percent of the screens delivered 56 percent of the gross, indicating that audiences sought out the format.
“We really feel this is proof of concept for this new style of 3-D,” said Anne Globe, the DreamWorks chief of marketing and consumer products.

Over all, Hollywood sold $142.7 million in tickets over the weekend, a 35 percent increase over the same weekend last year. Sales for the year are up 12 percent on a 10 percent rise in attendance, according to Media by Numbers.

Jeffrey Katzenberg, chief executive and co-founder of DreamWorks Animation, has tied the future of the company tightly to 3-D. All his future films will be released in that format.

But a success with “ Monsters vs. Aliens” was crucial for the studio for other reasons. The film is DreamWorks Animation’s only release in 2009. The studio has typically delivered two movies a year, but altered that plan as a crush of 3-D films was scheduled to enter the marketplace.

The studio also hoped to quiet investor worries about whipsawing quality. Reviews were mixed (and much more negative than those for recent releases by rival Pixar), but good enough to satisfy some people on Wall Street: Cowen and Company upgraded its recommendation on the studio’s stock, saying its “capability to consistently release high-quality films has improved.”

Second place at the box office went to “The Haunting in Connecticut,” a horror entry from Lionsgate, which is waging battle with the corporate raider Carl Icahn. That inexpensive picture sold a solid $23 million in tickets.

“Knowing,” a science-fiction thriller from Summit Entertainment that was No. 1 the previous weekend, was third this weekend with an estimated $14.7 million (for a total of $46.2 million since opening), showing solid audience retention in its second week.

“I Love You, Man,” from Paramount and DreamWorks Studios, the live-action cousin to Mr. Katzenberg’s company, sold an estimated $12.6 million ($37 million so far). Rounding out the Top 5 was “Duplicity,” a romantic thriller starring Julia Roberts and Clive Owen, with $7.6 million ($25.6 million so far).

The performance of “Duplicity,” produced by Universal Pictures and Relativity Media, has been disappointing, particularly given the former ability of Ms. Roberts to turn out masses. While the movie charmed critics, audience chatter has been focused on a bloated running time and its seriousness, a surprise since the studio marketed it as lighthearted.
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