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'Zero Dark Thirty' defeats 'Gangster Squad;' 'Haunted House' strong

By Ben Fritz

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The hunt for Osama Bin Laden last year proved a bigger draw for moviegoers than a battle against organized crime 70 years ago.

Thriller "Zero Dark Thirty" had a decisive victory at the box office this weekend, grossing \$24 million in the U.S. and Canada, according to an estimate from distributor Sony Pictures.

Despite a bigger budget and more famous stars such as Sean Penn, Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone, "Gangster Squad" opened to a disappointing \$16.7 million.

The low budget horror spoof "A Haunted House," starring Marlon Wayans, had a strong start, meanwhile, launching with \$18.8 million.

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Going into the weekend, pre-release surveys suggested all three new movies would have very close openings of about \$20 million.

"Zero Dark Thirty," which was financed by producer Megan Ellison's Annapurna Pictures for about \$45 million, was widely covered in the media Thursday, though not for reasons its backers had hoped. Despite landing an Academy Award nomination for best picture as expected, director Kathryn Bigelow was snubbed in her category.

That came on top of several weeks of controversy over accusations by activists and politicians, including prominent senators, that it misportrayed the usefulness of CIA torture in the process of locating Bin Laden.

Nonetheless, Sony's strategy of playing "Zero Dark Thirty" in limited release for the last three weeks and then expanding nationwide the day after Oscar nominations appears to have paid off. Its solid start brings the movie's total gross to \$29.5 million.

Audiences liked the thriller starring Jessica Chastain, giving it an average grade of A-minus, according to market research firm CinemaScore. Good word-of-mouth, along with possible victories at Sunday night's Golden Globe awards, could keep "Zero Dark Thirty" playing strong for several weeks, particularly among adults who don't always rush out to see films on opening weekend.

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Of attendees this weekend, 62% were over 30.

Two of the top three grossing theaters for "Zero Dark" were in the D.C. area, an unusual feat and a sign of how fascinated people in the nation's capital are with the picture.

Warner Bros. had hoped "Gangster Squad," based on true events in Los Angeles, would also open to more than \$20 million. But unlike the other two pictures, ticket sales declined from Friday to Saturday, a bad sign for audience buzz that came on top of weak reviews.

Nonetheless, with a CinemaScore of B-plus and an audience evenly distributed between men and women, the studio is hopeful that grosses will decline modestly over Martin Luther King Day weekend next week, said executive vice president of distribution Jeff Goldstein.

Warner and partner Village Roadshow Pictures paid a little over \$60 million to make "Gangster Squad."

PHOTOS: Billion-dollar films

"A Haunted House," by contrast, cost only about \$2.5 million to produce, making its opening a big win. The spoof movie was financed by IM Global's genre label Octane Pictures and released by Open Road Films.

Wayans is known to horror parody fans for his role in the similar "Scary Movie 2" in 2001. With several prominent black co-stars, including Cedric the Entertainer and J.B. Smoove, the movie drew an audience that was 48% African American. Surprisingly, 58% of attendees were women.

Despite its B-minus CinemaScore, the lowest of the three new films, grosses for "Haunted House" rose 10% from Friday to Saturday, stronger than "Zero Dark" or "Gangster" and a sign of positive word-of-mouth.

Box office receipts for last weekend's No. 1 film, the horror remake "Texas Chainsaw 3D," plummeted 76% to \$5.2 million.