

Counting down the summer's hottest movies



John Neville as the title character in Terry Gilliam's 'The Adventures of Baron Munchausen'

By JOHN BLAND
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It's been another blockbuster summer for Hollywood. In fact, Hollywood has made more money this summer than they ever have before. Hell, they made more money this summer than Exxon made last year.

Well, maybe not exactly that much, but they did rake in some dough. And it's not quite over yet, either. By the time this gets to press, the much-anticipated "The Abyss" will have opened, as will have Ron Howard's "Parenthood." Count on both of these adding to the grand totals.

Unlike last summer, when three overly-hyped movies opened on the same weekend ("Willow," "Crocodile Dundee II" and "Rambo III"), with none achieving the kind of success anticipated for them, this summer has seen three blockbusters, each of which opened in a different month: May's "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade," June's "Batman" and July's "Lethal Weapon II." For August, expect to add "The Abyss." Each was made with an enormous budget, with "The Abyss" taking top honors with estimated \$47 million production costs and a \$15 million publicity campaign (that's \$62 million to you and me). By the time you read this, "The Abyss" will have either sunk or swam.

Sleepers have been surprising this summer as well. "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids" has taken in almost \$100 million, helped by the return of Roger Rabbit in the companion cartoon "Tummy Trouble." Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing" has wowed critics and made fools out of industry executives by earning almost as much as the blockbusters on a per-screen basis. For example, one weekend in July "Batman" pulled in around \$1,350 per screen. "Do the Right Thing" pulled in slightly less. The difference? "Batman" was on almost 2,000 screens; "Do the Right Thing" on less than half that.

Perhaps even more surprising is the success of two adult-oriented films: "Dead Poets Society" and "When Harry Met Sally..." The summer is usually fertile ground for mindless teenage drivel, but these two movies have sparked a revival in adult moviegoing. Although the ad campaign for "Dead Poets Society," making it seem as if it were a comedy in the vein of "Good Morning Vietnam," was deplorable, it got the job done and brought in the viewers, who were then treated to a serious dramatic movie in which Robin Williams played only a supporting role.

"When Harry Met Sally..." was released late enough so that it will probably hang around well into the fall, when films of its kind are usually released.

As for flops, "Great Balls of Fire" went nowhere, although it really wasn't as bad as all that. "Ghostbusters II" faded fast in the wake of "Batman," but still made good money. Nobody knows why "Licence to Kill" flopped. "Shag" had a great concept but also had a lame screenplay and an even lazier director. "Star Trek V" just got in over its head.

One of the bigger surprises of the summer has been the quality of the films. This time, these movies seemed to have been made with care, and not just hammered out like a tin copy. The relative scarcity of sequels this summer attests to that, and the sequels which have been made are as good as, if not better than, the originals.

It then gets down to the nitty gritty, of which films are tops, which are flops. I have neglected to list the flops.

Here, then, is my Top Ten List of Summer Flix, in reverse order.

10. "Great Balls of Fire" — This one makes its basis on the basis of its soundtrack. A film with great potential, it fails mainly because of star Dennis Quaid's overacting and its tendency to fall into self-parody. Co-star Winona Ryder is one to watch, though.

9. "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" — I was really disappointed by this movie. Director Steven Spielberg moves nowhere (except in a charming opening sequence with a young Indiana Jones), and Executive Producer George Lucas, as he did with last year's "Willow," throws money at special effects (here not that good) instead of a decent script. Stretches the imagination just a little too far.

8. "Scandal" — Technically not a "summer" movie, this one makes it because it's a tasteful, intelligent, sexy rendition of a true 1962 scandal which rocked the conservative British government. John Hurt is brilliant, as usual, and Joanne Whalley-Kilmer as the teenage dancer who brought down a government is stunningly beautiful.

7. "Peter Pan" — I don't care, I love this movie. Any Disney animated classic is automatically going on my list. I just can't wait until they re-release "Fantasia."

6. "Licence To Kill" — I liked it. In fact, I think it's one of the better Bond movies in recent years. Timothy Dalton, however, is a little too somber as 007, and needs a dash of Sean Connery's charm. The stunts are, as

usual, unbelievable, and I loved pointing out all the Key West landmarks which I toured during Spring Break.

5. "Lethal Weapon II" — Not as fast-paced as last summer's "Die Hard," but close. Mel Gibson and Danny Glover reprise their roles as L.A. cops, this time clashing with some serious bad boys: South African drug dealers hiding behind diplomatic credentials. A body count in the thousands. Not for the squeamish.

4. "The Adventures of Baron Munchausen" — This \$40-million extravaganza, directed by Monty Python alumnus Terry Gilliam, is simply delightful. Stage veteran John Neville is the Baron, who claims to have done everything from visited the King of the Moon (Robin Williams, billed here as Ray D. Tutto for legal reasons) to the gods Vulcan and Venus (Oliver Reed and the delectable Uma Thurman). Truth is, he has. Gilliam directs with a deft touch, and the special effects outdo "Indiana Jones." See it while you can.

3. "When Harry Met Sally..." Rob Reiner's comedy follows the lives of Harry (Billy Crystal) and Sally (Meg Ryan) over the course of ten years, as they go from being casual acquaintances to best friends who "accidentally" sleep together, then must face the consequences. Nora Ephron's ("Heartburn") screenplay raises plenty of questions about male-female relationships. Contains one side-splitting scene in a deli. Crystal and Ryan are perfect in this polished tribute to Woody Allen.

2. "Dead Poets Society" — Robin Williams is neither the star nor the central character in this period film about growing up in a conservative boy's school in New England. While Tom Schulman's screenplay does tend to get a tad simplistic at times, Australian director Peter Weir won't let that prevent him from making a great film. He controls Williams, who gives a wonderfully understated performance, but energizes his young, largely unknown, cast. Quite simply a beautiful movie, with the best cinematography of the year.

1. "Batman" — Oh, yeah. What can I say? Thrilling, funny, eye-popping, this movie has it all. Jack Nicholson blows the mind as the Joker, Michael Keaton surprises as the icy Batman, and director Tim Burton gives us the most original movie of the summer, one which left me eminently satisfied as a moviegoer. Sure, it's all style, but damn, what style!

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