

Patrons urge S'pore cinemas to do better

Bundled experiences, better programming and improved phone etiquette are on their wish lists

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The cinema business in Singapore just cannot catch a break.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, people learnt to stay home to enjoy movies, while streaming services went all out to win subscribers with compelling content. Subscribers learnt that if they waited a few months, they could watch recently released movies on Netflix, Disney+ or Prime Video.

Just as theatres were coming alive again, the Hollywood labour disputes of 2023 happened in the United States – involving mainly the twin strikes of the Writers Guild of America and actors' union SAG-Aftra, which lasted over four months and three months respectively.

This caused major releases such as the Avatar fantasy franchise, spy actioner Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part Two, and superhero movies The Batman: Part II and Captain America: Brave New World to be moved to 2025 and beyond.

This trend can be seen more clearly in the US, according to recent reports. It has caused studios to play it safe by making sequels and sticking to crowd-pulling stars.

But even that has not worked, as seen in the underperformance of Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga and The Fall Guy in the American market.

Ms Laura Chua, course manager (diploma in mass media management) at Nanyang Polytechnic's School of Business Management, thinks it is too early to write off the cinema business in Singapore.

"Despite so much going on in consumers' daily lives, I still believe that going to the cinema provides a unique experience and can hold its own against other options," she says.

"It provides consumers a respite from small mobile screens. Even a home theatre doesn't quite equate to or replicate that cinematic experience."

Singapore's movie-watching trends mirror that of the US, she says. For example, 2023's top-grossing films there were mostly matched here.

"Stars are drawing viewers, at least in Singapore."

Seeing the soft performance of Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga and The Fall Guy in May as indicators of a cruel summer ahead at the box office might be premature.

"Attendance and takings will increase once the school holidays start," she adds.



Singapore's Oldham Theatre is both a cinema and cultural centre, which has facilities such as oral history recording studios and conservation labs. Film and marketing experts here suggest Singapore cinemas spice things up by adding new programmes or bundling other experiences with movie releases. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN



Movies like IF want to stay in cinemas longer to take advantage of the school holidays. PHOTO: UIP

This is a sentiment echoed by the spokesman for film distributor UIP. Its family dramedy IF, which stars Ryan Reynolds and John Krasinski, opened on May 16, just before the start of the mid-year school holidays. As at May 29, the movie has earned an unspectacular \$514,000 at the local box office.

UIP hopes to keep IF in cinemas till June 23, when the school holiday ends, to stretch its chances at

selling more tickets.

Cinemas reached a high in Singapore in 2011, and has been trending downwards since then. According to figures from the Singapore Department of Statistics, cinema attendance reached 22.1 million in 2011. By 2023, that number had more than halved to 10 million.

Ms Chua notes that the numbers for cinema attendance and box-

office revenue for 2022 and 2023 in Singapore showed little change, indicating stagnancy.

Innovation is needed to make cinemas exciting, and they can draw inspiration from South Korea, she says.

The country's three largest multiplex chains – CJ CGV, Lotte Cinema and Megabox – have expanded their business scope to offer a range of experiences.

For example, CJ CGV offers a short-game golf studio, a climbing gym and a bowling pub.

In Singapore, mall cinemas are located near vendors offering amenities such as climbing walls and food.

Says Ms Chua: "Imagine if they were packaged. Our cinema operators might need to think out of the box and work with landlords and fellow tenants to explore new partnerships. It's about bundling the activities together. Patrons watch a movie and do something at a discounted price."

Associate professor of marketing Hannah Chang from Singapore Management University says cinema operators here have been innovating.

"Many cinemas have rolled out cutting-edge projection and sound options, and more luxurious seating, and added dine-in options," she says.

Mr Ben Slater, a writer and film lecturer at Nanyang Technological University, thinks cinema operators have generally done a good job keeping up with the latest international trends in digital projection.

He believes that while streaming services compete with cinemas, they do not fill every need.

"Most people watch those services for series. The big-screen experience has a lot of value for younger audiences who don't want to see films on their mobile phones and tablets," he says.

Singaporean film producer Lai Weijie and his wife Elizabeth

Wijaya, assistant professor of East Asian cinema at the University of Toronto, have been to cinemas in both Singapore and Canada.

Dr Wijaya says she likes going to Oldham Theatre in Singapore and Tiff Lightbox in Toronto. Both are cinemas that double as cultural centres which offer curated programmes.

Her main annoyances with Singapore cinemas are the lack of variety in programming and the number of patrons who use their mobile phones, a habit she finds distracting.

"Going to the cinema is a break I treasure," she says.

Lai says his pet peeve is that local cinemas do not properly set up their projectors and sound for the films they show. "When the halls don't calibrate their equipment for the optimal experience, it's disrespectful to audiences."

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