B.O. Report: *Guardians* Regains Top Spot, *Sin City* Sequel Flops

By Pamela McClintock

**THE PENULTIMATE WEEKEND** of summer ranged from lackluster to terrible for new offerings *If I Stay* and *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*, making way for *Guardians of the Galaxy* to reclaim the No. 1 spot at the North American box office as it also became the top-grossing movie of the season.

Disney and Marvel Studios’ *Guardians* took in $17.6 million in its fourth weekend for a domestic total of $251.9 million, eclipsing the $243.3 million grossed by *Transformers: Age of Extinction*. And it will soon become the top-grossing film of the year domestically when it overtakes fellow Marvel title *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* ($259.8 million). Globally, *Guardians* has earned $489 million to date.

Holdover *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* narrowly beat YA tearjerker *If I Stay* to take the No. 2 spot in its third weekend, grossing $16.8 million for a domestic haul of $145.6 million and worldwide tally of $230.8 million to date. *If I Stay* followed with $16.4 million.

The YA film adaptation starring Chloe Grace Moretz was widely expected to win the weekend with an $18 million-plus debut. However, pre-release tracking was once again wildly off (services had
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the movie launching to $22 million.

From directors Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, Sin City 2 placed a dismal No. 8 with $6.5 million. The sequel opens nine years after the first film launched to more than $29 million (many are questioning whether the gap was too long).

The weekend’s third new offering, inspirational high-school football drama When the Game Stands Tall, enjoyed solid business, grossing $9 million to come in No. 5. From Sony’s faith-based label Affirm, the movie was the only new title to see an uptick on Saturday, thanks to families.

If I Stay, which earned an A- CinemaScore, was fueled by younger females, although they didn’t turn out in force like they did for The Fault in Our Stars, which opened to a rousing $48 million earlier this summer. Females made up 77 percent of ticket buyers for If I Stay, while 61 percent were under the age of 25.

Females made up 64 percent of the audience, while 78 percent of ticket buyers were under the age of 25. The sequel was under the age of 25. The sequel was that cost $11 million for a $24.1 million cume.

Tracking services, which have been rather unreliable this summer, showed Sin City 2 opening to $15 million or more.

“We stand behind the film, and Robert [Rodriguez] is a member of the Weinstein family,” said TWC distribution chief Erik Lomis. “We never expected this level of rejection. It’s like the icebucket challenge without the good cause, and it’s a major disappointment.”

Jim Caviezel, Laura Dern, Michael Chiklis and Alexander Ludwig star in Game Stands Tall, which is based on the story of Northern California high school De La Salle’s 151-game winning streak and what happened after the team finally lost. The $10 million movie earned an A- CinemaScore.

Sony distribution president Rory Bruer said the company’s grassroots campaign paid off. “The picture will be in theaters for a long time,” he said. “It plays to the whole family.”

Fox’s R-rated comedy Let’s Be Cops fell less than 40 percent in its second weekend to place No. 4 with $11 million for a domestic total of $45.2 million.

The Weinstein Co. and Walden Media’s YA adaptation The Giver placed No. 6 in its second weekend, slipping 45 percent to $6.7 million for a $24.1 million cume. The movie, which opened to $12.3 million last weekend, was no doubt hurt by the arrival of If I Stay.

Lionsgate and Millennium’s action pic The Expendables 3 took the No. 7 spot, tumbling 58 percent in its second outing to $6.6 million after a franchise-worst $15.9 million debut. The movie, hurt by piracy and franchise fatigue, has earned a total of $27.5 million in North America.

Martin in Talks to Star in Disney’s Magic Camp

By Borys Kit

PRESTO! STEVE MARTIN IS SET TO return to Disney.

The actor-comedian is in final negotiations to star in Magic Camp, a family comedy the studio is developing.

Martin’s imminent acting deal deepens his involvement with the project as it comes after he wrote the most recent draft of the script with Stu Zicherman, the writer-director behind the comedy
A.C.O.D. The script was originally penned by Gabe Sachs and Jeff Judah, the team whose credits include such films as 2010’s Diary of a Wimpy Kid. (Sachs and Judah are now acting as producers on Magic Camp.)

The story tells of a strait-laced banker who returns to magic camp, which he attended as a shy child. This time he is a counselor who makes it his mission to improve the lives of all the kids while keeping an eye on his ultimate prize, the top spot at the Golden Wand competition.

The project is in Martin’s wheelhouse as he got his start working at Magic Shop at Disneyland and was a magician in his early days as a comic. No director is on board.

Martin last worked with Disney with the studio’s Touchstone label on 2005’s Shopgirl, and before that he starred in 2003 comedy hit Bringing Down the House. The actor made his mark at the studio in the 1990s with the Father of the Bride movies.

Martin’s last feature starring role was in the 2011 comedy The Big Year with Jack Black and Owen Wilson.

Zicherman also is a writer-producer on FX’s The Americans and co-created the TV drama Six Degrees.

Martin is repped by WME.

SONY IN TALKS TO OPTION PRICE CRIME NOVEL WHITES

By Rebecca Ford

SONY IS IN NEGOTIATIONS TO OPTION Richard Price’s upcoming crime novel The Whites, with Scott Rudin set to produce.

For Price, Whites is his debut under the pen name Harry Brandt. The book is slated to hit stores Feb. 17, 2015, via Henry Holt.

The novel harkens back to some of Price’s signature themes and settings, including cops, criminals and New York City. The story follows detective Billy Graves, whose tainted past comes back to haunt him when he takes on a harrowing case during one of his graveyard shifts.

Michael De Luca will oversee the project for Sony. The studio had no comment on the deal.

Price’s earlier works include 1972’s The Wanderers, which was adapted into a film in 1979; 1992’s Clockers, which was made into a film directed by Spike Lee; and 2008’s Lush Life.

Price also has written screenplays for several films, including 1996’s Ransom, 1989’s Sea of Love and 1986’s The Color of Money, for which he earned an Oscar nomination for best adapted screenplay. He also wrote several episodes of HBO’s hit series The Wire.

CHINA SHUTS DOWN BEIJING INDIE FEST

By Clifford Coonan

BEIJING — Chinese authorities have once again shuttered the Beijing Independent Film Festival on its opening day, as the government keeps a tight leash on pics outside the state-approved system.

The festival tries to offer a platform for independent cinema, but for many months now, China’s ruling Communist Party has been tightening the screws on dissenting views, including movies from outside the tightly monitored and heavily regulated Chinese film industry.

Critic Li Xianting, one of the organizers of the event, told The Associated Press that police searched his office and confiscated materials he had gathered over more than 10 years.

Organizers said they had been repeatedly warned to cancel the fest, which was supposed to run until the end of the month.

Li and the fest’s artistic director, Wang Hongwei, who is a regular in Jia Zhangke movies, were later detained by police, according to tweets by their supporters.
The event has taken place on and off since 2006 in the Beijing suburb of Songzhuang, which is home to many artists’ studios and galleries, but has faced repeated pressure from the government.

Shutting the festival has become an annual game of cat and mouse with the authorities. Last year, visitors were allowed to watch DVDs in small groups; the previous year officials cut electricity to the event. For the past four years, the Beijing government has organized a large film fest in the capital which attracts lots of Hollywood talent and presents the official version of the film business in China.

This year the crackdown is much more serious, Wang said.

“In the past few years when they forced us to cancel the festival, we just moved it to other places, or delayed the screenings,” he told The Associated Press. “But this year, we cannot carry on with the festival. It is completely forbidden.”

Officials claiming to be villagers blocked access to the site, intimidating reporters trying to enter, and the AP said that one of its journalists had a camera broken and a cellphone confiscated.

There were efforts last week to move the festival to a hotel in Hebei province, near Beijing, but there were reportedly problems with the venue.

FRENCH COMEDY SAMBA TO CLOSE SAN SEBASTIAN

By Pamela Rolfe

MADRID — French comedy Samba, by Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, will have its European premiere as the closing film at the San Sebastian International Film Festival, organizers said Friday.

The much-anticipated follow-up from the directors of The Intouchables again stars Omar Sy as a Senegalese immigrant in France trying to get his papers who meets a burned-out executive hoping to get her life back in order.

The film, which will screen at the upcoming Toronto International Film Festival, is a Quad and Gaumont co-production. It is set for release Oct. 15 in France, while A Contracorriente plans to release the pic this winter in Spain.

The San Sebastian fest is set to run Sept. 19-27 in Spain’s Basque region.

BRITISH ACTOR, DIRECTOR ATtenBROUGH DIES AT 90

By Duane Byrge

SIR RICHARD ATtenBROUGH, WHOSE crusade to bring the life of Mahatma Gandhi to the screen culminated in eight Academy Awards for 1982’s Gandhi, including a best director Oscar for the multihyphenate, has died at the age of 90, his son told BBC News on Sunday.

A producer, director and actor, Attenborough won a BAFTA Award for acting in 1964 (he was double-nominated for Seance on a Wet Afternoon and Guns at Batasi). He won two Golden Globes for acting in The Sand Pebbles (1966) and Dr. Dolittle (1967), and one for direction, Oh! What A Lovely War (1969).

“Richard Attenborough was one of the greats of cinema,” British Prime Minister David Cameron said Sunday in a statement on Twitter.


Richard Samuel Attenborough was born Aug. 29, 1923, in Cambridge, England. He was knighted in 1976 and became a life peer in 1993. During a multifaceted career, he also served as chairman of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Attenborough co-starred with Steve McQueen in The Great Escape (1963), playing the nervy mastermind behind the escape. In 1966, he appeared with James Stewart in The Flight of the Phoenix. He followed that up with Sand Pebbles and

Sir Richard Attenborough directed the Oscar-winning title Gandhi and appeared in more than 70 movies as an actor.


Attenborough made his breakthrough in direction in 1968 with Lovely War, a parody of patriotism, which was also significant for having John Lennon in its cast. The film went on to win 16 international awards, including another Golden Globe.

Following his triumph with Gandhi, Attenborough directed a number of top films, including the film adaptation of musical A Chorus Line (1985), anti-apartheid film Cry Freedom and biopic Chaplin.

Following Chaplin, he made a return to the screen at the behest of longtime admirer Steven Spielberg, starring in Jurassic Park (1993) as John Hammond. He reprised the role again in Jurassic Park: The Lost World (1997) and, in a similar vein, he is featured on Universal Studios’ Jurassic Park ride, assuring passengers in a short film that precedes the tour that the ride is perfectly safe.

“Dickie Attenborough was passionate about everything in his life — family, friends, country and career,” Spielberg said Sunday in a statement. “He made a gift to the world with his emotional epic Gandhi, and he was the perfect ringmaster to bring the dinosaurs back to life as John Hammond in Jurassic Park. He was a dear friend, and I am standing in an endless line of those who completely adored him.”

Attenborough is survived by his wife Sheila, son Michael and daughter Charlotte.
By Michael O’Connell

AMC has found a director for Afghanistan drama White City. The project, recently ordered to pilot, will be helmed by Stephen Gaghan.

The writer and director, perhaps best known for his Oscar-winning adapted screenplay for Steven Soderbergh’s Traffic, also will serve as an executive producer on the project, which comes from novelist Nick McDonell and politico John Dempsey. Chris Mundy and Tom Freston also serve as executive producers.

“Nick and John were actually staying at my house, fresh out of Kabul, when they were going around pitching the show,” said Gaghan, who had exceptionally flattering words for the project and the network. “They then went on to write a truly astonishing script. Which got the attention of another old pal, Chris Mundy. It reminds me of Altman’s M*A*S*H or a great Hal Ashby script. But really, let’s face it, if Coppola was doing Apocalypse Now today, it would be an AMC series.”

White City is set in Afghanistan and follows a group of Western diplomats and journalists, focusing on “war junkie” Jon Liston, who oversteps his bounds after an exchange with insurgents.

“We’re unbelievably excited that Stephen is doing this,” said Mundy. “Before the pilot was even ordered, we talked about him as our dream director so to have it come to fruition is incredible. He not only knows and cares deeply about the terrain we’re covering, but he brings an energy and intelligence that you can’t match. It’s a show that everyone involved with feels very passionate about and protective of. So, to have Stephen step in and match that same passion makes us realize how lucky we are.”

White City is one of several pilots currently in the works at AMC as the network looks to beef up its scripted offerings with the era of Breaking Bad and Mad Men coming to a close. Freshman drama Halt and Catch Fire was renewed last week.

Gaghan’s other credits include writing and directing 2005 film Syriana. He is repped by CAA.

**BATES MOTEL’S HIGHMORE, EHRIN SELL COMEDY TO NBC**

By Lesley Goldberg

BATES MOTEL co-showrunner Kerry Ehrin and star Freddie Highmore are expanding their relationship.

The duo is teaming for an untitled romantic comedy set up at NBC, The Hollywood Reporter has learned, with the network handing out a script commitment to the project.

The untitled comedy will be written by Ehrin and recent Cambridge University graduate Highmore and mark the actor’s first time penning a pilot script. The half-hour single-camera vehicle is set in the world of venture capitalism. It centers on the intimate relationship between an overly emotional but talented female executive and her ambitious and eccentric young British assistant.

It’s unclear if Highmore, who stars as young Norman Bates on A&E’s Psycho prequel Bates Motel, will have an onscreen role should the project move forward. Highmore and Ehrin will executive produce the comedy, which hails from Universal Television, where the latter has an overall deal.

Ehrin and Highmore came up with the idea for the show while attending June’s Critics Choice Awards, where the latter...
**NFL, RAPPER M.I.A. SETTLE MIDDLE-FINGER LAWSUIT**

By Eriq Gardner

NEW YORK — After two and a half years, a dispute over M.I.A.’s halftime performance at Super Bowl XLVI has been resolved.

When the rapper extended her middle finger during her performance on Feb. 5, 2012, the National Football League took her to arbitration with claims of breaching her contract and tarnishing the league’s goodwill and reputation.

The 38-year-old M.I.A. (born Mathangi “Maya” Arulpragasam) put up a defense that ridiculed the league for even claiming wholesomeness.

The NFL later asserted $16.6 million in damages for what the rapper did before 167 million TV viewers. The league wanted $15.1 million of that amount for restitution as the alleged value of public exposure she received by appearing for an approximately two-minute segment during Madonna’s performance. The assessment of damages was challenged in arbitration in light of the fact that the FCC had declined to take any action on the indecency front. Although the dispute was handled in arbitration, which typically remains private, an investigation by M.I.A.’s lawyer into the league’s reputation represented a potential embarrassment for the league. Or, at least, a distraction. Nevertheless, the NFL pursued an apology plus money, which it said it would donate to charity.

News of the settlement comes as the NFL has reportedly begun asking potential halftime performers to kick in a portion of their post-performance revenue. The settlement has been confirmed by M.I.A.’s attorney, Howard King. Despite what the league demanded, though, M.I.A hasn’t apologized.

**NBC DROPS OZ-THEMED DRAMA EMERALD CITY**

By Lesley Goldberg

THE STRAIGHT-TO-SERIES MODEL has claimed another victim.

NBC’s Wizard of Oz-themed drama Emerald City will not move forward, The Hollywood Reporter has confirmed.

The drama went straight to series with a 10-episode pickup in January, with Josh Friedman (Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles) attached to pen the script alongside Matt Arnold (Siberia), with Universal Television producing.

NBC has opted not to move forward with the project after the network and producers could not agree on a shared vision for the show. Studio Universal TV will likely shop the series to other potential suitors. The news comes after the network promoted the project in July at Comic-Con with a major push for the drama, which had not yet begun casting. Described as a “dramatic and modern reimagining,” Emerald City focuses on a headstrong 20-year-old, Dorothy Gale, unwittingly sent to Oz, where she finds herself at the center of an epic battle.

Emerald City joins Fox’s ancient Egyptian drama Hieroglyph as straight-to-series pickups that were dropped ahead of their premieres. In the case of the latter, the series was already fully cast and filmed a pilot.

Emerald City was one of a handful of projects in the works timed to the 75th anniversary of Oz.

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and Bates Motel co-star Vera Farmiga were both nominated for their lead acting roles. The drama, from co-showrunner Carlton Cuse, will return for its third season in 2015.

Ehrin, whose credits include Parenthood, Friday Night Lights, Boston Legal and Moonlighting, is repped by Rothman Brecher. She most recently teamed with Revenge’s Nikki Toscano for CIA drama Red Zone, which went to pilot at CBS but did not move forward.

Highmore, who has had roles in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Finding Neverland and August Rush, is repped by ARG and Felker Toczek.

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**DOCTOR WHO SEASON BOW ATTRACTS 6.8 MIL TO BBC**

By Georg Szalai

LONDON — The first episode of the eighth season of BBC hit show Doctor Who on Saturday night drew an average audience of 6.8 million, making it the show’s most-watched season opener in the U.K. since 2010.

The full-episode debut of Peter Capaldi in the lead role of the Time Lord peaked with 7.3 million viewers on the public broadcaster’s flagship network BBC One. Its average audience amounted to a 32.5 percent share of the total U.K. TV audience at the time.

Capaldi succeeded Matt Smith as the Doctor on the popular sci-fi show, which airs on BBC America in the U.S.

The overnight ratings for Saturday’s episode compared with the 6.4 million overnight average audience that tuned into the first Doctor Who episode of season seven in September 2012. The final figure was later reported as 8.3 million.

These figures do not include viewings via iPlayer, the BBC’s digital VOD service, which has in some cases added more than 2 million viewers.

The new season’s opening ratings also compare with the 5.5 million overnight and nearly 7.5 million final ratings for the final episode of the seventh season.

In 2011, the opening episode of season six drew 6.5 million viewers, compared with 8 million overnight (and 10.08 million final) in 2010 when Smith made his debut as the Doctor, and 8.4 million in 2008. In 2007, the show’s season opener drew 8.2 million viewers to BBC One; it reached 8 million in 2006; and in 2005, the season premiere drew 9.9 million.

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Click here for THR’s coverage of the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards.
Turkish Helmer Mintas’ *Song of My Mother* Named Best Film at Sarajevo

By Nick Holdsworth

**THE SARAJEVO FILM FESTIVAL** wrapped its star-studded 20th anniversary edition Saturday with its $21,000 Council of Europe-backed top award, the Heart of Sarajevo for best film, going to Turkish director Erol Mintas’ *Song of My Mother*.

The pic, the helmer’s feature debut, tells the story of an aging mother and her son forced to move out of their Istanbul neighborhood by gentrification — a hot topic in a city that has been convulsed by violent protests over redevelopment.

The fest’s international feature competition jury, headed by Hungarian director Bela Tarr, who now runs the masters-level film school Film Factory in Sarajevo, said *Song* displayed “courageous simplicity.”

The film, a Turkey/France/Germany co-production, also earned best actor honors for Feyyaz Duman, who plays a Kurdish teacher and writer.

The awards were presented at the Sarajevo’s National Theater — a building that survived destruction during the city’s four-year siege in the early 1990s. A special jury prize went to Georgia/France co-production *Brides* from Tinate Kajrishvili for “its subtle cinematic approach in telling an intricate tale of separation, suffering, hoped and despair.”

A $13,000 cash award for the film, which also garnered best actress honors for Mari Kitia, was provided by French fashion designer and filmmaker Agnes B., who was presented with an honorary Heart of Sarajevo award at the start of the fest, which began Aug. 15.

Germany/Croatia co-production *The Chicken*, directed by Una Gunjak, was named best short film. A special jury mention was given to *The Execution* (Hungary/Romania) by Petra Szocs.

Best documentary went to Croatian helmer Tiha K. Gudac’s *Naked Island*, while a special jury prize was awarded to Hungarian director Eszter Hajdu’s *Judgment in Hungary*.

Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal and Oscar-winning Bosnian filmmaker Danis Tanovic each received honorary Heart of Sarajevo awards.

British actor Simon McBurney was in attendance for the gala screening of closing-night film Woody Allen’s *Magic in the Moonlight*, in which he appears alongside Colin Firth. Other guests included British director and Sarajevo regular Mike Leigh, photographer Annie Leibovitz, helmer Michael Winterbottom and actress (and main competition jury member) Melissa Leo.

The festival — which has expanded beyond its original focus on Balkan films to encompass work from a wider southeast European region and grown to include a range of training and professional industry events — screened 247 films from 60 countries this year.

Festival training program Talents Sarajevo, a collaboration with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science and launched in cooperation with the Berlin International Film Festival, marked its eighth edition with workshops hosted by former Academy president and veteran producer Hawk Koch. He led an audience of actors, directors, scriptwriters, producers, critics and cinematographers, through the maze of Hollywood filmmaking in a session moderated by Oscar-nominated helmer Michele Ohayon.

The festival, which also hosts the co-production event CineLink and industry gathering Regional Forum, this year launched a new co-production fund aimed at bringing the region’s talent to international attention.

The fund — which is open to feature-film projects from former Yugoslav countries and the wider region that wish to co-produce with new markets outside Europe’s Eurimages/Creative Europe territories — has already secured a budget of $530,000 for the next two years.

Supported by the European Commission’s Co-Production Funds (part of the new Creative Europe MEDIA program) and large Croatian food and consumer-goods company Atlantic Grupa, the primary focus of the fund will be to support co-production projects with the U.S., Canada, South America, the Middle East, North Africa, India and East Asia.

Up to eight feature projects will be supported over the next two years through soft loans of up to $80,000 per project and the same amount for P&A.

“Since we started out during the siege of Sarajevo, we have spent the past 20 years developing a major international film festival, but also helping rebuild the film industry in our region,” said festival director Mirsad Purivatra.

The festival’s co-production market CineLink has greatly contributed to regional cooperation, he added.

“With this in place, now it is time to take the next step,” continued Purivatra. “With our region full of talent — that is constantly being recognized internationally — and with the Doha Film Institute, Mexican IMCINE, the Indian NFDC and other global partners already coming to Sarajevo, this is the next logical step.”

Jovan Marjanovic, the fest’s head of industry, added that the public/private partnership in supporting the fund reflected the important role business can play in filmmaking in the region.

“Film and culture are proven vectors of social and economic cohesion and development,” he said. 

**The Hollywood Reporter**
WHEN THE GAME STANDS TALL

By Stephen Farber

Inspirational sports movies always have audience appeal, but it’s hard to imagine a huge crowd turning out for the latest feel-good football drama, *When the Game Stands Tall*. This paint-by-numbers tale of a winning high school football team in northern California probably hopes to attract the back-to-school audience. But it’s too blandly acted and directed to make much of an impact.

An earlier football movie this year, the Kevin Costner-Ivan Reitman collaboration *Draft Day*, was somewhat underrated and also underperformed at the box office. This new pic has more gridiron action to please fans, but the script by Scott Marshall Smith is far more formulaic.

Smith recounts the true story of the De La Salle Spartans, a team that had broken records by winning 151 consecutive games by the end of its 2003 season. But the story begins when some setbacks threaten their 2004 season. First, team coach Bob Ladouceur (Jim Caviezel) suffers a heart attack. Then an African-American team member (Stephan James) is murdered in a ruckus before he is about to head off to college. Reeling from these setbacks, the team loses its first two games of the new season before their spirit of brotherhood gets them back on track.

The big problem with the film is that it’s short of drama off the football field. The coach makes a thorough recovery that allows him to resume his duties fairly soon. There are a few conflicts among the teammates, but these are all fairly mild. The team quarterback (Alexander Ludwig) faces pressure from an overbearing father (Clancy Brown), but that’s about the only bit of drama that ratchets up the tepid energy level.

Characterizations are also very thin. It’s always good to see Laura Dern, but she is wasted in the role of Ladouceur’s wife, who pushes him to take a college coaching job, but otherwise remains on the sidelines. The team members are fairly indistinguishable, sketched with broad brushstrokes that prevent any of them from emerging as memorable.

The movie may hope to seduce the growing audience for faith-based films. The picture skims over the fact that De La Salle is a Catholic high school, but it does include scenes in which Ladouceur teaches religion classes and tries to use lessons from the gospels to inspire his students and team players. Yet this element is fairly understated.

Director Thomas Carter (who made another inspirational sports movie, the more vigorous *Coach Carter*, several years ago) finally picks up the pace during an extended football game where the Spartans try to return to form by taking on a top Long Beach team consisting of a group of giant bruisers. This game is well filmed and edited, as is the season’s climactic match. Sports fans will enjoy the action in these two sequences, but there’s little to sustain interest through the rest of the excessive running time.

Caviezel hasn’t had a major screen role since he starred in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* a decade ago. He’s been busy on the TV series *Person of Interest*, but in this big-screen outing he seems to be going through the motions without a lot of flair. Michael Chiklis does a solid job as Ladouceur’s assistant coach. The young actors who play the team members are appealing, but no one really jumps out. As the competitive father, Brown gives probably the most compelling performance in a role that’s a variation on the part played by the late Vic Morrow in *The Bad News Bears*. Technical credits are all competent, but this earnest film never really manages to get our adrenaline racing.

Opened: Aug. 22 (TriStar).
Production: Mandalay, Affirm Films.
Cast: Jim Caviezel, Laura Dern, Michael Chiklis, Clancy Brown, Alexander Ludwig, Matthew Daddario, Stephan James, Joe Massingill, Jessie T. Usher.
Director: Thomas Carter.
Rated PG, 115 minutes.

THE POSSESSION OF MICHAEL KING

By Frank Scheck

NEW YORK — From its demonic possession storyline to its found-footage format, *The Possession of Michael King* is nothing horror-film aficionados haven’t seen before ad nauseam. But despite its overwhelmingly stale air of familiarity, this debut feature by David Jung manages to impress thanks to its technical expertise and a compelling performance by Shane Johnson in the title role. Being given a token theatrical release just days...
FILM REVIEWS

THE PRINCE

By Frank Scheck

NEW YORK — A retired assassin is forced to use his special skills while moving heaven and earth to find his kidnapped daughter. No, it’s not Taken, but rather The Prince, Brian A. Miller’s B-movie action-thriller that mainly serves to illustrate how far such former marquee names as Jason Patric, Bruce Willis and John Cusack have fallen. Being given a limited theatrical release, the film should score well on VOD and homevideo formats due to its familiar faces, but it sorely illustrates that these talented actors are in desperate need of career reassessments.

The story concerns Paul (Patric), a widowed father who discovers that his college-age daughter Beth (Gia Mantegna) has gone missing. Enlisting one of her school friends (Jessica Lowndes) to help track her down, Paul soon finds himself confronting an array of bad guys who he dispatches with the sort of ruthless efficiency and seeming invulnerability specific to action-movie heroes.

The trail eventually leads to a drug dealer, appropriately known as “The Pharmacy” (Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson), who’s been supplying the strung-up young woman with heroin. But the real bad guy is Omar (Willis), a crime boss whose wife and young daughter were blown up in a car bomb planted by Paul years earlier in a deadly mistake that has

Omar thirsting for revenge. Along the way, Paul also enlists the services of a former cohort (Cusack) who demonstrates that he too has lost none of his violent mojo.

The screenplay by Andre Fabrizio and Jeremy Passmore is strictly by the numbers, essentially repeating the same scene over and over in which Paul politely asks various unsavory characters for information, is rudely rebuffed, and then, to quote one of Willis’ more quality projects, gets medieval on their asses. Wit is in short supply, but director Miller at least keeps things moving briskly throughout the relatively brief running time.

Patric brings his trademark intensity to his role, Cusack provides his usual sly presence and Willis, whose shooting schedule reportedly consisted of a mere five days, picks up a paycheck. The latter’s henchman is played by Jung Ji-Hoon, aka Korean pop star Rain, whose presence at least guarantees decent box-office totals in Asian markets.

As with so many B-movies these days, The Prince was filmed partially in New Orleans, which never fails to provide the requisite exotic atmosphere.

Opened: Aug. 22 (Lionsgate).
Production: Grindstone Entertainment Group, Emnet Furla Oasis Films, Aperature Entertainment.
Cast: Jason Patric, Bruce Willis, John Cusack, Jung Ji-Hoon, Jessica Lowndes, Jonathan Schaech, Gia Mantegna, Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson.
Director: Brian A. Miller.
Rated R, 91 minutes.

before its DVD debut, the movie signals bigger things to come for its tyro filmmaker if he can manage to mine more original territory.

Jung, working from a story co-devised with Tedi Sarafian, finds a convenient excuse for the tired stylistic format — please, no more! — by making his central character a, you guessed it, documentary filmmaker. Unfortunately, Michael King’s plan to make a heartwarming film about his happy family life is derailed when his wife is suddenly killed in an accident.

Blaming the tarot-card reader (Dale Dickey) his wife was seeing for placing her in the circumstances that led to her death, avowed atheist Michael instead decides to make his film about the search for the supernatural with himself as the main guinea pig. Outfitting himself with a variety of tiny cameras and enlisting the services of a friend as an extra cameraman, he seeks out practitioners of the occult, including demonologists and mediums, and invites them to perform their dark magic on him, assuming that the resultant failure will confirm his beliefs.

But there wouldn’t be much of a horror film if that were to happen, so predictably Michael soon finds himself, as the title would suggest, possessed by a dark force that makes him increasingly unhinged and a danger to himself and those around him, especially his young daughter (Ella Anderson).

Jung does manage to invest the familiar proceedings with some quirky, original touches, such as Michael’s purchasing a “Demon Summoning Kit” online, ingesting psychotropic drugs and finding ants crawling all over his body. There are also many intriguing characters on display, including a necromancer mortician played with delicious relish by Cullen Douglas.

The found-footage format is as tiresome as ever, with the profusion of shots taken from every conceivable viewpoint defying all logic. But it does give Johnson the opportunity to showcase his acting chops in a series of increasingly disturbing direct addresses to the camera, including a harrowing self-mutilation scene.

The violent ending is a direct crib from the genre’s gold standard, The Exorcist, in a miscalculation which seems to unnecessarily invite unflattering comparisons.

Opened: Aug. 22 (Anchor Bay).
Production: Gold Circle Entertainment, Quickfire Films.
Director-screenwriter: David Jung.
Rated R, 83 minutes.