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CATEGORY

Box Office: What's Behind the Surprising Success of 'God's Not Dead'?

Posted March 24th, 2014 9:00AM by Gary Susman

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Take that, Friedrich Nietzsche.

The biggest surprise this weekend at the [box office](#) was not the success of "[Divergent](#)," which was widely expected to be the far-and-away frontrunner (and was, with an estimated \$55.0 million). Nor was it the weak opening of "[Muppets Most Wanted](#)" (debuting at No. 2, with an estimated \$16.5 million). Rather, it was the movie that opened in fifth place, "[God's Not Dead](#)."

Unlike the two big-budget movies at the top, both of which opened on more than 3,200 screens, "God's Not Dead" was released by the small independent distributor Freestyle on just 780 screens, and yet the star-free picture (unless you count 1990s TV hunks Kevin Sorbo and [Dean Cain](#) as big stars) earned an estimated \$8.6 million, averaging a healthy \$10,979 per screen. ("[Divergent](#)" averaged \$14,228, while "Muppets" averaged just \$5,170.) Most notably, "God's Not Dead" was an explicitly Christian-themed movie, of the sort that usually top out around \$6 million over their entire theatrical run.

How did "God's Not Dead" buck the trend for such movies and crack the top five? Here are some possible reasons:

It's the year of the Bible movie. As Christian audiences are aware, between the current hit "[Son of God](#)," next week's much-anticipated "[Noah](#)," Ridley Scott's forthcoming "[Exodus](#)," and other movies in the pipeline, 2014 (and 2015) will see a number of mainstream Hollywood movies based on Bible stories. Whether the faithful find these blockbusters satisfying or not, such movies encourage enthusiasm in the marketplace for homegrown Christian parables like "God's Not Dead." At the very least, they encourage Christian non-moviegoers who tend to shun the multiplex to get



GOD'S NOT DEAD



95min.

A devoutly religious college freshman must debate the existence of God with his skeptical philosophy professor in order to earn a passing grade in this faith-based comedy-drama featuring Kevin Sorbo and David A.R. White. Josh Wheaton (Shane Harper) is a Christian who never thought his faith would get in the way of his higher education. As a result, he is deeply shaken when, on the first day of"... [Read More](#)

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into the habit of moviegoing.

It's pre-sold. As is often the case with such films, direct marketing to churches and church groups resulted in heavy group pre-sales. In fact, "God's Not Dead" was so heavily pre-sold that it was the No. 3 movie on Friday, not the No. 5 movie, pulling ahead of all but "Divergent" and "Muppets Most Wanted." (Then again, those pre-sale Friday numbers tend to cause an artificial drop over the rest of the weekend.)

It's contemporary. Christian movies with modern-day settings, like this one, or "Courageous," or "Fireproof," tend to open between \$6 and \$9 million. Period movies, like "Christmas Candle," are lucky to earn half that much during their entire run.

It touches a nerve. The movie is about a Christian student at a secular college who debates his atheist philosophy professor (Sorbo, wearing a devilish goatee) over the existence of God. So the plot ties into the current zeitgeist among some Christians, the ones who feel persecuted by secularism. Not just in popular culture (see "Duck Dynasty" star Phil Robertson's suspension over allegedly homophobic and racially insensitive comments), but also in law (see the current court battles over whether Christian-owned businesses can be compelled to provide employees with health coverage that includes contraception or abortion, or the recently vetoed Arizona bill that would have permitted Christian business owners to discriminate against gays and lesbians).

In this film, academia stands in for all those other arenas where Christians are supposedly shouted down and punished for voicing Biblical dogma. In fact, Phil Robertson's son and daughter-in-law, Willie and Korie Robertson, have cameos in "God's Not Dead." Never mind that this persecution complex may be unwarranted; after all, we live in a country where the First Amendment protects all religions from government encroachment, where the overwhelming majority of citizens and legislators call themselves Christians, and where "Duck Dynasty" reinstated Phil Robertson before he missed an episode or a royalty check. None of that matters; so many Christians feel besieged that this movie was bound to resonate among some of them.

It picked the right weekend. Not just because "Son of God" is flagging and "Noah" hasn't opened yet. The filmmakers were also lucky that enthusiasm for both "Divergent" and "Muppets" was less than expected; both films opened at the low end of the range of predictions. Also, last week's [action thriller "Need for Speed"](#) took a 56 percent dip, falling to an estimated \$7.8 million, allowing "God's Not Dead" to squeak into the top five.

It's not all rosy for "God's Not Dead." For one thing, with "Noah" flooding multiplexes next weekend, the faithful will have a much bigger, more-hyped movie to flock to, giving this one a very short window to make its money. For another, its theater count is just about equal to the number of theaters "Son of God" dropped (851) this week, suggesting that the Christian movie audience may have a natural ceiling, and that the marketplace has already found it.

Still, the movie's big opening shouldn't come as such a surprise. It seems every time there's a huge debut among a market perceived to be a small niche -- whether its Christian moviegoers or black audiences or Latinos or women -- the industry treats it as a fluke, a rare exception to the mainstream formula filmmaking and demographic marketing that the industry relies on. But what if the conventional wisdom is wrong?

How many flukes do there have to be before they're seen not as the exception but the rule?

Photo courtesy Pure Flix Entertainment

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