



<http://theenvelope.latimes.com/movies/env-brokebackcontroversy21dec21,0,3770404.story?page=2&coll=env-movies>

NEWS

Bucking controversy

"Brokeback Mountain," a love story between two cowboys, would seem to be a natural to spur strife. So, where are the protests?

By Phoebe Flowers, Orlando Sun-Sentinel

In theory, "Brokeback Mountain" should be generating a lot of controversy.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the picket line -- one never materialized.

The critically adored Ang Lee drama starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger and known, for better or worse, as "the gay cowboy movie," is a bona-fide pop-culture event. For gay audiences -- along with the many heterosexuals who are equally eager to see the heartthrob stars entangled -- the movie's arrival in theaters is cause for celebration.

But because of its subject matter, which involves honest (read: graphic) depictions of a romantic relationship between two men, objections from conservative factions were expected. This is, after all, a country polarized by issues like same-sex marriage.

And yet, no formal protests or theater boycotts have been launched.

"I have to say, it seems like it's a coordinated, political strategy from the religious right," said Ellen Huang, a former movie studio executive who now runs Queer Lounge, a program based at the Sundance Film Festival that supports gay-themed films. "They know that if they make a stink about it now, then it will cause more controversy and more curiosity from the public to see this film, and they don't want to hand this card to the other side. The religious right is anticipating the movie's going to fail, but if it doesn't and generates momentum on its own, then you're guaranteed to start hearing from them."

Indeed, Robert Knight, director of the Culture & Family Institute at Concerned Women for America, recently told Salon.com that his group isn't even deigning to acknowledge "Brokeback Mountain." "People aren't going to walk around outside theaters with protest signs," he said in an interview with the online publication. "This is something that could be and should be ignored."

Ignoring the film is also the apparent strategy at the Center for Reclaiming America in Fort Lauderdale. Homosexuality is one of the group's top avowed "battleground issues." But executive director Gary Cass said the center hasn't targeted "Brokeback Mountain."

"People are talking about how much money the film has made, but it's a limited-release film on few screens, and it's going to flop," Cass said Tuesday. "People may want to seem tolerant, but they won't want to brag about seeing 'Brokeback Mountain.'"

But so far, the \$13 million Brokeback Mountain is getting plenty of attention -- all of it positive. It led the Golden Globes with seven nominations, won the top prize at September's Venice Film Festival, and has already been chosen the movie of the year by the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, the National Board of Review and the New York Film Critics Circle.

The distributor, Universal Studios' Focus Features, has been methodically releasing the film in target areas since Dec. 9. That weekend, it played on a dozen screens in just five locations -- including New York and San Francisco -- and, in three days, took in \$544,549.

On Dec. 11, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) sent out a press release touting the box-office take as "the highest per-screen average ever for an adult drama, according to Exhibitor Relations Co. Inc." GLAAD president Neil G. Giuliano happily called Brokeback "our gay Gone With the Wind."

Last weekend, however, was the first real test, as Focus unveiled the movie in 21 more big cities -- including our own. The drama jumped into the top 10 with an impressive average of \$34,194 per screen, the highest of any film now playing.

Business has been booming at the Gateway Theater, the nearest place for Broward and Palm Beach residents to see the movie. The theater began pre-sales about two weeks before Brokeback opened there Dec. 16, according to manager George Kapriskie.

"Most all of the shows have sold out, or come very close to it, even on the weekdays," he said Tuesday. Currently, the theater is running the movie in two of its four auditoriums, for seven showtimes per day.

The interesting thing about the anticipation for the movie, however, is that it's not just gay men who are tripping over themselves to see it.

Take 73-year-old Barbara Dix, a Fort Lauderdale artist who loved the Annie Proulx short-story collection from which the film was adapted. "I can't wait!" she said.

"Proulx understands the reality of love, and the kind of love that persists or continues over a long time," Dix continued. "Especially because I think because it has to be covert, it grew, and -- oh, it was so tender!"

Women, regardless of their sexual orientation, have always been part of the marketing strategy for "Brokeback Mountain." Newsweek reported recently that when director Lee and producer James Schamus (who is also the co-president of Focus Features) were first talking about to whom they were most hoping to appeal, Lee assumed it would be gay men. "No," Schamus replied, "women."

As such, Focus' marketing department even intentionally modeled the movie's poster after that of "Titanic," a movie that raked in its substantial fortune almost entirely on the strength of estrogen-fueled spending power.

Huang said she was first struck by the crossover potential during September's Toronto International Film Festival, where it was an unqualified smash. "I just thought, well, you know, if girls are still screaming at Jake Gyllenhaal walking out on the red carpet, when they know that he's about to make out with a guy on-screen? Like, there you go!"

Huang thinks women might be predisposed to be less judgmental on the issue. "I think what's so interesting," she said, "is that I think the predominant amount of people watching Showtime's lesbian-themed soap opera "The L Word" are gay women and straight women. And I think in general, you're talking about a demographic that's much more open, and maybe perhaps more intuitive about universal themes, and glomming onto that as opposed to who the love story is happening between."

"Brokeback Mountain" comes on the heels of a series of recent movies with predominant gay themes, including "Transamerica," "Rent," "Capote" and "Happy Endings."

But the movie is different from them -- and from earlier hallmarks like "Philadelphia," "In & Out" or "The Birdcage" -- according to Huang.

"I think what's so significant about this film is the fact that it's probably the first time we've seen an honest, sexual and loving relationship between two men, done in a dramatic way," she said, "with the kind of star power that's involved with it, with the kind of Oscar-winning director behind it, with the kind of studio mounting an Oscar campaign around this whole thing."

It remains to be seen, however, how much crossover appeal "Brokeback Mountain" will ultimately have, especially as it expands into the red states from which Hollywood is frequently accused of being so disconnected.

Producer Schamus recently told Entertainment Weekly, "A lot of people who voted for Bush are gonna love this movie."

But plenty of those people are still dubious.

"I can't think of a more effective way to annoy and alienate most moviegoing Americans than to show two cowboys lusting after each other," Knight, the Culture and Family Institute director, wrote on his group's Web site.

There may be a simple solution to appeasing the Americans for whom Knight speaks, however.

"Just don't go!" said Dix. "Just stay away! Once you know what it's about, just stay home."

Phoebe Flowers can be reached at pflowerssun-sentinel.com.

James D. Davis contributed to this story.

Copyright © 2006, Los Angeles Times. By visiting this site you are agreeing to our [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Map](#)