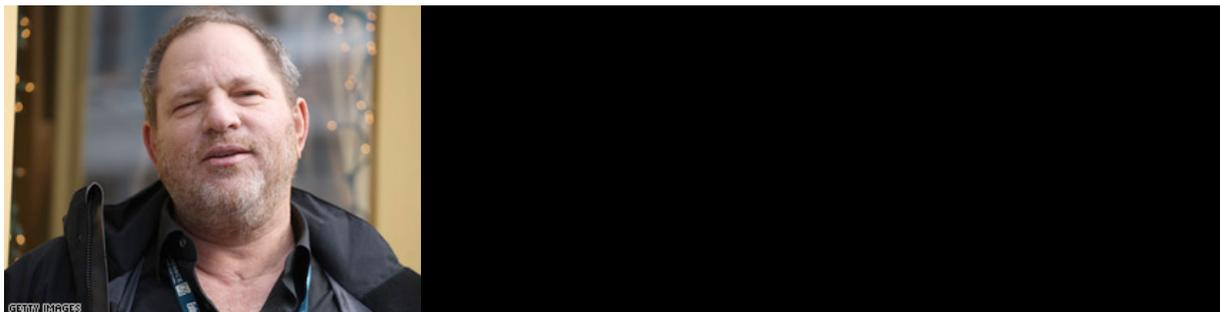


## Can the critics' faves also be money makers?

By Todd Leopold  
CNN

(CNN) -- In the post-"Star Wars" era, a major divide has opened between summer blockbusters, often special-effects extravaganzas, and the late-year prestige films.



Harvey Weinstein, the co-founder of Miramax, is a genius at marketing "prestige" films.

So how can a film bridge that divide, becoming a box-office bonanza and a critical favorite?

It's not easy, notes former film executive Peter Sealey, with the get-'em-in-get-'em-out mentality that rules among studios and theater owners.

Years ago, he recalls, a studio would open a film in a handful of cities and take up to two years to get a film from major markets to international cities to video and syndication. Now, he says, "You open on the same day around the world" on tens of thousands of screens, hoping to foil pirates and debut at No. 1 on the box office list (a key promotional tool).

That can leave smaller films scrambling for exposure. The divide worries filmmaker John Sayles, who's concerned that many independent films may get lost if they fail to receive studio support or distribution.

The market has grown exponentially, he points out, from a handful of independent films when he started in the late '70s to thousands just at the Sundance Film Festival this year. (Sayles and his partner, Maggie Renzi, having had a bad experience with his last film, "Silver City," are distributing his latest film, "Honeydripper," themselves.)

"One of our problems is that we have \$1 million to sell our movie," he says. "We're competing with 'Juno,' 'Waitress,' and we can't compete in the same markets."

"Juno" and "Waitress" are films that were snapped up by the major studios' indie divisions, and both films benefited from the modern-day slow rollout strategies created by brothers Harvey and Bob Weinstein, who founded the onetime independent Miramax in the late '70s.

As film professor Jim Collins describes it, the Weinsteins, who remain masters of promotion, would release a film late in the year in New York and Los Angeles, build momentum through critical praise and advertising, and use the Golden Globes and the Oscars to boost films even more.

The Weinsteins have had huge success: Their Oscar campaign for "Shakespeare in Love" is widely believed to have helped win that film best picture over "Saving Private Ryan."

Sayles remembers getting the Miramax treatment for his 1992 film "Passion Fish."

"Miramax spent \$350,000 [on Oscar promotion], which was a lot then," he recalls. Because of Miramax's spending, other studios got into the act, he adds. "[Major] studios started raising you and calling you."

Success has bred more competition, which means more money but narrower targeting of audiences for Oscar-caliber films -- which then feeds the divide between blockbusters and prestige films. That leaves filmmakers like Sayles trying to figure out new ways of marketing their wares. (For "Honeydripper," the film has opened in conjunction with a blues concert tour.)

Given the new media outlets that have opened, Sayles is asked, what about a straight-to-video strategy? All well and good, he says, except that "theatrical drives video, even if just as a loss leader. It's changed, but theatrical is still the most important advertising you

get." E-mail to a friend 