

Hollywood: 'The Empire' Strikes It Rich

As the industry axiom goes, the best advertisement for a film is a long line. And "The Empire Strikes Back," currently showing in 126 American cities, has had no shortage of those. "Empire," the sequel to "Star Wars," has grossed George Lucas's company, Lucas Films, nearly \$10 million in its first week, 60 percent above the first week's receipts for "Star Wars."

Of "Empire's" debut, Peter Meyers, senior vice president for domestic distribution at 20th Century-Fox, said, "We had people lining up days in advance, sleeping on the street before it opened."

The theater that recorded the largest first-week gate, The Egyptian in Los Angeles, started showing the film at 12:01 A.M. Monday, May 19, with 24-hour continuous showings, grossing \$219,138. And it played just as well in Peoria — \$56,176 in revenues the first week — nearly double the "Star Wars" take there two years earlier. "Empire's" gross has averaged \$77,000 a theater.

"Star Wars," of course, turned out to be the most financially successful movie ever, with a gross of \$400 million. That's a tough act to follow, and

"Empire's" profit is far from guaranteed. "You can't really determine the success of a film until after the fourth week," said Harold Vogel, a film-industry analyst at Merrill Lynch. "With a film like 'The Empire Strikes Back' all the buffs want to see it the first week. Later you see how it holds up in wide distribution and if it gets much repeat business. Repeat business is what makes a film."

So far, "Empire" has been in limited distribution and will continue that way for the first month. The strategy is designed to generate public interest by the struggle to see the movie — a "hard-ticket" play. Executives at Fox, which paid \$10 million of the film's estimated \$24 million cost in return for a percentage of the rental fee, are quick to point out that this technique only works with good movies. "If you have a bad movie with a hard ticket, rumors kill you in the fourth and fifth week," said a Fox executive.

Tomorrow, "Empire" will open in 575 more theaters, and a better assessment of the film's profitability can be made. "At any rate the movie is pretty much guaranteed to make back the investment," Mr. Vogel said. "Later we

can tell by how much."

Fox and Lucas Films have assumed that the film will continue to be a success. "We've been frugal on advertising and it's still a hit," said one Fox ex-

ecutive. "When most major films open we run a full page ad in most major papers. For 'Empire' the ads were 600 to 700 lines and the draw for the film is setting records."



The New York Times/Jack Manning

New Yorkers line up to see 'The Empire Strikes Back'

The New York Times

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