

FILM REVIEW



Marijuana is not just for dopes anymore, at least not in Hollywood.

Thirty years after comedians Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong popularized the myth of stoners as amiable goofballs in *Up in Smoke*, film and television producers are instead portraying pot smokers as regular folks from all walks of life.

On TV, there is *Weeds*, which became a hit on US cable network Showtime following its 2005 debut. It revolves around a widowed mom who deals dope to make ends meet.

Among movies, the *Harold & Kumar* movies center on a stoner investment banker and medical school candidate. In the art-house film *The Wackness*, Ben Kingsley plays a pot-smoking psychiatrist and, in the upcoming comedy *Pineapple Express*, Seth Rogen portrays a sky-high legal process server.

Some culture watchers say these new portrayals promote use of the illegal drug use among children, while the film and TV producers argue they simply reflect a change in society.

Many say these relatively recent depictions would have been harder to present in the past with US administrations backing the "war on drugs" that dates to the early 1970s, including the Reagan White House's "Just Say No" campaign of the 1980s.

"Political climates and cultural climates kind of go together. That was a more conservative era in lots of ways," said Bruce Mirken, spokesman for the Marijuana Policy Project that advocates decriminalization of the drug.

A 2005 study by California-based Rand Corp found the US government's anti-drug campaign had not led to "substantial decreases in the severity of America's drug-related problems."

World Health Organization researchers last month released a study saying Americans lead the world in marijuana use with more than 42 percent of US citizens acknowledging having tried cannabis. That amounts to just over 125 million Americans, based on a population of roughly 300 million.

Roberto Benabib, an executive producer of *Weeds*, said he was high



Above: Comedians Cheech Marin, left, and Tommy Chong pose with artificial marijuana plants after announcing their first comedy tour in 25 years during a news conference in Los Angeles last month. Top left: Presenters Seth Rogen, left, and James Franco perform in a skit about marijuana at the 2008 MTV Movie Awards in Los Angeles. Top right: Cast member James Franco attends the premiere of the film *Pineapple Express* in Los Angeles last month. The marijuana-fueled action flick marks a sort of comeback to comedy for Franco. PHOTOS: REUTERS



on the program's prospects when it premiered in 2005.

"We felt that it was kind of one of the last untouched subjects — that, kind of, sex had been done on HBO on various shows and that drugs had kind of been left alone because it was the last taboo," Benabib said.

With *Pineapple Express*, which opened in US theaters on Wednesday, the so-called "stoner film" has evolved into an action-packed comedy. The idea about a pair of potheads on the run from police came from the mind of producer Judd Apatow, who also was behind the hit comedy *Knocked Up*.

"He had this notion of a weed-action movie," said Rogen, who also co-wrote the script. "I thought 'That could be rad.'"

But it is not a cool concept to the conservative Parents Television Council, which has noticed the growth in marijuana-themed TV shows and movies and worries the portrayals will boost dope smoking by children.

"If kids can be influenced to smoke cigarettes, which are illegal to sell to minors, why should we believe that a child would not be as inclined to smoke marijuana, which is not legal?" said Melissa Henson, a spokeswoman for the group.

Hollywood players say their portrayal of marijuana use is not meant to encourage anyone to smoke pot. They just want to make it part of storylines to reflect today's society.

In *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* and this year's sequel *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*, the key characters are of Asian and Indian descent. The filmmakers wanted, in part, to break the stereotype that those ethnic groups are too rule-bound, said writer and director Jon Hurwitz.

Even Tommy Chong, 70, and Cheech Marin, 62, who were a top comedy team of the 1970s, said marijuana movies these days differ from their brand of pot humor.

"Ours is more primitive, theirs are more sophisticated," Chong said.

Hollywood drugs taboo goes up in smoke

Three decades after Cheech and Chong played amiable stoners in 'Up in Smoke,' film and television producers are portraying pot smokers as regular folks from all walks of life

BY ALEX DOBUZINSKIS
REUTERS, LOS ANGELES



■ **The Dark Knight**
(黑暗騎士)
NT\$7,742,386



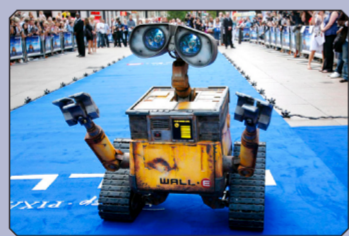
■ **Wanted**
(刺客聯盟)
NT\$6,435,994

TAIPEI'S TOP FIVE

City cinema weekend box office takings

(Aug. 2 and Aug. 3)

Source: Group Power Entertainment Corp



■ **WALL-E**
(瓦力)
NT\$5,381,134



■ **X-Files: I Want to Believe**
(X檔案: 我要相信)
NT\$2,226,575



■ **Red Cliff**
(赤壁)
NT\$1,625,110

OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Kabei

Here's a Japanese film released in Taiwan for Father's Day. It's a strange way of promoting a film, given that the father character goes to jail at the outset and hands over the central role to the mother of the family, Kabei, who spends the next half-century of this saga working to keep her family together. Like *Riding the Metro*, an earnest Japanese drama of a broken family that was released here in April, the story is steeped in conservatism and blinkered history, which won't necessarily concern Taiwanese audiences with a yen for Japanese films. Directed by the 76-year-old Yoji Yamada, who spent nearly 30 years of his life directing the *Tora-san* series.



REEL NEWS

Wang Lee-hom (王力宏), 33, accused Indian filmmakers of plagiarizing his music and is seeking US\$320,000 in damages, his agent said on Wednesday.

The US-born singer, popular throughout Southeast Asia, is seeking damages from Tips Films, distributor of the Hindi film *Race*, which was released in March, Sony BMG Music Entertainment Ltd said.

Sony BMG said it reserves the right to take legal action against *Race*'s distributor for plagiarism.

Wang Lee-hom is in fighting spirit.
PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

"The lead song in *Race*, *Zara Zara Touch Me*, resembles Wang's song *Deep in the Bamboo Grove* (竹林深處)," Sony BMG said in a statement. "Its rhythm and tempo are similar to that of *Deep in the Bamboo Grove*. The similarity is nearly 100 percent."

Race has been shown in India, the US, Britain, Australia and Malaysia, and its sound track has been released in those countries.

Deep in the Bamboo Grove is part of Wang's CD *The Sun and Moon in My Heart* (心中的日月), a collection of 12 Chinese-language songs released in December 2004. The song mixes a Tibetan woman's singing with hip-hop and Chinese drums and flutes.

Meanwhile, Batman has proven unstoppable, taking out all his rivals, but this time at the box office. *The Dark Knight*, the sixth movie featuring the superhero, has become the fastest moneymaker in Hollywood history, exceeding US\$400 million in ticket sales in the US and Canada in 18 days, the *Hollywood Reporter*, a newspaper covering the entertainment

industry, said on Tuesday.

The previous record holder was 2004's *Shrek 2*, which took 43 days to reach the same mark.

The Dark Knight's ticket sales in the rest of the world has pushed its total income up to US\$602.5 million as of Monday, according to the Web site Box Office Mojo.

Film industry observers said they expected the movie to exceed US\$500 million in domestic sales, but surpassing the top grosser of all time, *Titanic* at US\$600.8 million, was seen as unlikely, even for a superhero.

But *The Dark Knight* has set other records. It took in US\$67.2 million on its opening day July 18 in the US and Canada, eclipsing the previous record set by *Spider-Man 3* at nearly US\$60 million. It also had the biggest opening weekend with US\$158.4 million and has gone on to be the top grosser for three straight weekends.

In Taiwan, financial incentives to draw film and TV producers to Kaohsiung City to shoot movies and programs have proven effective, with a number of production teams taking up the



Heath Ledger's star turn in *Batman* helped the film break box office records. PHOTOS: REUTERS

offer to film there in the past few months, the city government said Monday.

Since Kaohsiung's Department of Information passed a measure earlier this year to pay subsidies to film or TV producers of US\$9.83 per day for each production team worker, at least 10 films and TV programs have been shot in the city, a municipal official said.

Among them was noted director Wu Nien-jen's (吳念真) new film *Take Me to the Faraway Place*

(帶我去遠方).

Under the incentive's provisions, film or TV drama production teams are eligible to receive subsidies of up to NT\$600,000, he said.

The official said that the department has already budgeted NT\$1.5 million in subsidies for producers to help pay for their crews' accommodation and signed a long-term contract with a hotel which provides rooms to film or TV crews at a reasonable price.

Another incentive drawn up to encourage film producers to use Kaohsiung as a backdrop for their stories is an NT\$10 million cash award for any picture where shots of the city account for at least a quarter of its length and that wins an award at any one of six major international film festivals, such as the Berlin International Film Festival.

Filmmakers in Moscow said on Sunday that Hollywood star Leonardo di Caprio, 33, would be ideal to play Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. "We have compared Di Caprio's photos with those of the

younger Lenin and the similarity is striking; he could play the role without make-up," renowned screenwriter Alexander Borojanski told Interfax news agency.

The actor had the same expression as Lenin, he said. It was uncertain whether the producers would manage to get Di Caprio to play the role. They said Sunday they wanted to discuss it with Di Caprio's agents first.

The film's working title was *Lenin's Brain* and it was a comedy with a US\$20 million budget, said Borojanski, who has just starting writing the script. Russian scientists manage to clone Lenin in the science-fiction comedy and he then sparks a socialist revolution in the US in the year 2004.

Lenin led the Russian communist uprising in 1917. "It is common knowledge that Di Caprio has Slavic roots. His ancestors on his mother's side emigrated from Russia to Germany," said Natalya Semina, director of the Moscow International Film Festival.

—AGENCIES