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## THE STATE

### 'Bubble' Bursts Film Tradition

Soderbergh's mystery closes the gap between theater, cable and DVD releases, but widens a rift within the industry.

By Claudia Eller

Times Staff Writer

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Hollywood is abuzz over "Bubble."

It's not that Steven Soderbergh's new art house movie is expected to break any box office records when it opens Friday. A low-budget murder mystery set in a doll factory and made with non-actors, it's hardly blockbuster material.

But because it's the first feature by an Oscar-winning director ("Traffic") to be released in theaters, on cable television and on DVD in a four-day span, "Bubble" is forcing everyone in town to wrestle with this question: Is the great American tradition of going out to the movies on its way out?

Already, Soderbergh's push to close the months-long window that traditionally separates a film's debut in theaters and its availability in other formats has triggered heated debate in the industry's creative and business communities.

Several veteran directors interviewed for this article said that although they understand that movie studios face increasing pressures from consumers who want to be able to choose when and how they view entertainment, Soderbergh is nevertheless on dangerous ground.

"Would I rather see 'Munich' in the comfort of my home? Hell, no!" said Jonathan Demme, whose credits include such hits as "Philadelphia" and "The Silence of the Lambs." "Doesn't it seem like the movie business is devouring itself because it can't wait to get to home video?"

Tim Burton, director of last year's "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" and the animated "Corpse Bride," called the notion of simultaneous release absurd. Obviously, he said, cinema is a business, "but everything should be done to treat it as an art form — it's a visceral medium."

Ron Howard, whose latest release is "Cinderella Man," agreed. "Viewing in a theater is the optimum experience," he said. "It needs to be preserved.... But, at the end of the day, technology and viewers are going to tell us what they really want."

Similar discussions — and arguments — are raging inside Hollywood's executive suites. Although Walt Disney Co. Chief Executive Bob Iger and Time Warner's Dick Parsons have publicly suggested that the simultaneous release of films across multiple formats is inevitable, their own movie studio chiefs are cautioning that preserving the communal moviegoing experience is vital not just to the culture but to the bottom line.

"As to our corporate bosses in New York, it's not my place to say their view is incorrect," Alan Horn, president of Warner Bros., said of his colleagues at Time Warner. "But ... while we embrace new technologies, we do so with deliberation, caution and forethought."

Although last year's industry-wide domestic box office receipts were down about 5% and attendance dropped about 8%, Horn says releasing a movie in a theater "does more than prime the pump" for its release in DVD and beyond. In 2005, Warner's movies generated \$3.3 billion in worldwide ticket sales.

"That's real money," Horn said.

Traditionally, studios have culled hefty profits from various distribution outlets by delaying the so-called ancillary markets — DVD, pay cable (such as HBO) and free TV — until after a theatrical run.

Those who argue to toss out this traditional approach believe it may be more lucrative to give consumers the choice of seeing movies however, whenever and wherever they want. Because at least half a film's revenue today comes from DVD sales, executives ask, why not make discs available at a premium price right away?

But for every media mogul who sees simultaneous release as a way for studios to increase profits (by stemming piracy and consolidating marketing

campaigns, among other things), there's another who disagrees.

Sony Pictures Vice Chairman Jeff Blake is among the skeptics: "I don't think anyone has shown how you can keep up the level of revenue we have now, much less make more money."

Jim Gianopulos, co-chairman of 20th Century Fox, agreed. He said the tiered system that has been in place since home video emerged 25 years ago "is not random. It's not accidental. There's logic to it." What advocates of simultaneous release are proposing "makes no sense."

Walt Disney Studios Chairman Dick Cook also defended the sanctity of the theatrical window. He finds himself engaged in "a constant dialogue" about the future of release windows with his Disney colleagues, including Iger, his boss.

It was Iger who broke the issue wide open last summer when he told a conference of investors and media analysts that simultaneous release was no longer "out of the question."

Echoing Soderbergh, who just a few months earlier had called Hollywood's existing economic model outdated, Iger said that just as the rules of consumption had changed, so should old distribution patterns be "called into question."

Theater owners, who fear such a shift would kill their already profit-challenged business, went nuts. John Fithian, president of the National Assn. of Theatre Owners, shot back that Iger should know better than to tell consumers "they can have it all, everywhere, at the same time."

Then M. Night Shyamalan, the director of such blockbusters as "The Sixth Sense" and "Signs," stepped forward to make a passionate case for why theater-going is an important collective experience. Alarmed by Soderbergh's plan to make six high-definition video movies for same-day release, Shyamalan publicly vowed he'd rather forsake filmmaking altogether than see his movies debut on the small screen.

Soderbergh, known both for his provocative indie films that include 1989's "sex, lies and videotape" as well as such studio hits as "Erin Brockovich" and "Oceans Eleven," declined to comment.

But Mark Cuban, the financier and distributor of "Bubble," was happy to take a shot at Shyamalan's fervent opposition to change.

"He should stop making movies then," the controversial entrepreneur said via e-mail. "He should also remove his existing titles from DVD release. That should make him very, very happy."

Cuban and his partner, Todd Wagner, who became dot-com billionaires when they sold Broadcast.com Inc. to Yahoo in 1999, will simultaneously open "Bubble" on Friday at 19 of their own Landmark Theaters and 16 other art houses. That same day, the film will debut on their high-definition HDNet Movies, a subscription service that is available on several cable and satellite systems. Four days later, they will release the DVD through their Magnolia Pictures.

The \$1.7-million "Bubble" — a 72-minute drama about an unlikely love triangle that stars the residents of the town at the Ohio-West Virginia border in which it was shot — is their second simultaneous release. Last April, they debuted the feature documentary "Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room" in art house theaters and on their HDNet Movies TV network.

That film grossed \$4 million at the box office — a lot more than many documentaries. But "Enron" director Alex Gibney said that although the release strategy was — and remains — "a worthy experiment" that enabled a concerted marketing push, ultimately it was "bad for the movie." That's because the nation's largest theater chains, led by Regal Entertainment, refuse to play any film that's released the same day in multiple formats.

Cuban and Wagner aren't the only ones trying simultaneous releases. Rainbow Media, a division of Cablevision Systems Corp., plans to release as many as 24 indie films a year in art house theaters and via a new video-on-demand service it's pitching to cable operators.

Proof of how divisive the simultaneous release issue has become can be found in some big-name directors' silence.

Contacted by The Times, Steven Spielberg's longtime publicist Marvin Levy said, "Steven is not going to comment on this."

A spokesperson for Martin Scorsese said, "He doesn't want to get into the public fray."

Even the powerful Directors Guild of America is loath to take a formal position on the issue.

"It's a fast-moving horizon, and as things develop, individual directors form different opinions on how the narrowing distribution windows will affect their films reaching the audience," said DGA President Michael Apted, whose credits include the 1999 James Bond film "The World is Not Enough."

But among those who spoke to The Times, there is agreement on one thing: Whether one's gadget of choice is an iPod or cellphone or something else, as technology changes how Americans entertain themselves, movies will have to adapt.

"Commerce always has to win," said Sydney Pollack, a director for more than 40 years whose movies include such classics as "The Way We Were" and "Tootsie."

Pollack, who is developing a movie project with Soderbergh, says he understands why his fellow director is "experimenting" with the new release

strategy on his smaller films.

"On the one hand, the businessman in me understands it," Pollack said. "But the lover of movies in me wants desperately to hang on to the movie house as a collective experience with the audience."

Woody Allen, whose current release is "Match Point," agreed.

"I know it's hard to argue with the convenience and immediacy of large high-definition TV screens in the comfort of your home versus the often irritating rigmarole of going out to the movies," Allen said in an e-mail. "But, I would still argue for it."

For his part, Michael Mann, whose "Miami Vice" is due in theaters this summer, said that although he frames every shot of his movies for big-screen viewing and he cherishes the "social experience" of going to the cinema, "the problem is technology has shown up and provided different distribution pathways."

When asked if he believed that simultaneous release was inevitable, Mann said the debate is moot.

"Once you can download 'Desperate Housewives' for \$1.99 onto your iPod, we're there."

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`Bubble' pricing

On Friday, Steven Soderbergh's "Bubble" will be the first feature film to be released simultaneously in theaters and on cable, with the DVD available just four days later. For comparison shoppers, here's what it'll cost to see it in each format:

- At Landmark's Nuart Theater in West Los Angeles, an adult ticket costs \$9.50.
- On the television network HDNet Movies, "Bubble" will be free to subscribers of its cable or satellite service. Monthly rates vary.
- A DVD will initially be available for a premium price of \$29.98.

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