

'M3gan' rakes in \$30.2M; 'Avatar' stays No. 1

JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Blumhouse evil-doll horror film "M3gan" got off to a killer start, debuting with \$30.2 million in ticket sales, according to studio estimates, while "Avatar: The Way of Water" continued its box-office reign in the top spot.

Universal Pictures' "M3gan," about a robot companion built for a young girl after her parents are killed in a car crash, rode strong buzz and viral dancing memes to an above-expectations debut. In the low-budget slasher, starring Allison Williams, Blumhouse and producer James Wan crafted Hollywood's first hit of the new year, likely spawning a new high-concept horror franchise.

Audiences gave the PG-13 film a "B" CinemaScore — though reviews (94% fresh on Rotten Tomatoes) were stronger for the

modern, techy twist on a "Child's Play"-like thriller. It added \$10 million internationally.

But while "M3gan" drew audiences largely in 2D showings, large-format screens continued to be soaked up by James Cameron's "Avatar: The Way of Water." The 3-D three-hour sequel remained No. 1 for the fourth straight week in U.S. and Canadian theaters with \$45 million in sales.

Cameron's sci-fi spectacle has now surpassed \$500 million domestically and \$1.7 billion globally. After dominating the otherwise lackluster holiday corridor, the "Avatar" sequel is nearly matching the original's pace; the 2009 "Avatar" scored \$50.3 million in its fourth weekend. "The Way of Water" already ranks as the seventh highest grossing film ever, not accounting for inflation — a total particularly owed to its

strong overseas performance. The film's \$1.2 billion in international ticket sales exceeds that of any film released since the start of the pandemic.

"M3gan" was the only new film in wide release, though Sony Pictures' "A Man Called Otto," starring Tom Hanks, played in 637 theaters after first launching in four theaters. The film, a remake of the Swedish film "A Man Called Ove," managed a solid \$4.2 million ahead of its nationwide release on Friday.

Third place went to "Puss in Boots: The Last Wish," with \$13.1 million in its third week of release. The animated Universal Pictures sequel has tallied \$87.7 million in three weeks, plus \$109.7 million internationally.

While many awards contenders have struggled in recent months at the box office, Darren Aronofsky's "The Whale" is



JORDAN STRAUSS, INVISION

The U.S. premiere of "Avatar: The Way of Water" took place Dec. 12, 2022, at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles.

proving a modest exception. The A24 indie starring Brendan Fraser ranked seventh in its fifth week of release with \$1.5 million and

a cumulative total of \$8.6 million — a good return for a film that cost an estimated \$3 million to make.

SKYWATCH



NASA.GOV

The Pleiades star cluster contains over 1,000 stars, though only seven are visible to the naked eye.

The sky is the limit for astronomy club

DALE HACHTEL AND PAUL LEVESQUE
Popular Astronomy Club

The Popular Astronomy Club has been part of this community since 1936, and we're pleased to report that we're still going strong.

PAC had a highly successful 2022, and we're looking forward to an even better year in 2023. Our members are continuing the mission our club has pursued from the time it was founded more than eight decades ago: to share the wonders of the night sky with as many people as possible and advance the cause of amateur astronomy within the Quad Cities and surrounding area.

The word "Popular" is right in our name, and that's because we believe that astronomy is for everyone. You don't need a telescope or a degree in science to join the club or participate in PAC-sponsored activities. All you need is an interest in astronomy and a desire to learn more about the stars, planets, galaxies and other fascinating objects found in the vast universe that we occupy.

From the start, PAC has held public outreach events designed to bring astronomy to where the people are. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we had to cancel or scale back many of those events.

As pandemic restrictions have eased, though, we were once again able to reach more people. By our count, 1,638 members of the public attended PAC outreach events in 2022. That's up from the 1,172 we counted in 2021; however, it's still short of past years, when total annual attendance at our events often exceeded 2,000.

Our 2022 numbers might have been better with more cooperation from the fickle Midwest weather. Four of our nine Niabi Zoo events, and seven other events scheduled for 2022, had to be canceled or postponed because of rain and/or cloudy skies.

As we have done in past years, and as will continue to do in 2023, PAC will hold monthly public observing events beginning at sunset at Niabi Zoo on the third Saturday of every month from March through November.

We try to accommodate requests for viewing sessions from organizations of all kinds: scout-

ing and youth groups, churches and houses of worship, community groups, schools, libraries, museums, campgrounds, etc.

When we do go out, we often bring the PACMO, our mobile observatory that comes equipped with a high-powered telescope. What we observe through that scope can be projected onto a video screen, meaning that an entire group can see what's being viewed without having to use an eyepiece. Individual telescopes are also available at these events, and PAC members are on hand to explain what you're looking at and answer questions.

PAC members can also do indoor presentations, including those featuring hands-on activities for kids (and interested adults). We also have special equipment for observing the sun. A note of caution: Solar observing requires specialized equipment with filters that screen out harmful rays. Looking at the sun without proper protection will severely damage your eyesight or even render you blind.

PAC members and guests are invited to our regular meetings, usually held on the second Monday of the month at the Butterworth Center in Moline. If you can't be there in person, you can attend the meeting virtually via Zoom.

Our meetings often feature presentations by subject-matter experts, and the ability to connect to anyone, anywhere by Zoom has expanded the range of interesting individuals who've presented at our meetings.

The topics covered at our meetings in 2022 included the Mars Curiosity rover, how birds use stars to navigate during migrations, the history of the U.S. Naval Observatory, radio astronomy and observations from the James Webb Space Telescope. PAC members also made presentations on various topics and displayed their own astronomical observations during our meetings.

Membership in PAC has its privileges. All PAC members are also enrolled as members in the nationwide Astronomical League and receive subscriptions to its "Reflector" magazine. New PAC members receive an official club

T-shirt, and who doesn't need another T-shirt? You don't need a telescope to join PAC because the club has telescopes that members can borrow, along with advice on how to use them.

The cost of an individual membership in PAC is just \$30 and only \$10 for students. To sign up, and to learn more about PAC, visit our website, at www.popularastronomyclub.org. You can also find us on Facebook.

We can't guarantee clear skies, but some of our public programs occur even if we can only talk about astronomy and look at previous images from past observing sessions.

Winter is actually a good time to go outside on a clear, dark night and gaze up at the night sky for naked eye observing without a telescope. Without spending time in the cold to set up and align a telescope, you can revisit some of the noted winter constellations.

In January, facing south to southeast in the evening, you can see the constellation Orion the Hunter. Several bright stars outline the shape of Orion, and the three stars in a row define Orion's belt.

The upper left star in Orion is known as Betelgeuse, and the lower right star is called Rigel. Both are among the 10 brightest stars in the sky. Both are also supergiant stars much larger than our sun; however, they are much different from each other.

Look closely and you may notice that Rigel is bluish white in color, indicating it is very hot as stars go. Betelgeuse is a red supergiant, and many times larger than Rigel, but only about one-quarter as hot.

A special event for any stargazers to watch, if the weather cooperates, will occur between 11 p.m. and midnight Jan. 30. The moon will be seen as slightly larger than its half-moon phase and will pass next to Mars as a conjunction.

We hope to see you at one of our events in 2023, and maybe even with us as a new member. All are welcome. Meanwhile, hope for clear skies and keep looking up.

Dale Hachtel is president and Paul Levesque is secretary and editor of the Popular Astronomy Club.

RURAL ROUTE 4

Backstory of 'This little piggy went to market'

I know I will sound old when I say this, but where did the year go?

Somehow, another year has whizzed by, and here we are at the start of another one. I hope that all of you had a good holiday season and that you are looking forward to the new year as much as I am.



JENNIFER EWOLDT

Here on the farm, I am spending a lot of time rounding up last year. This is the time of year when farmers have to gather together all their paperwork for the accountant and look at how the year went last year. We also make plans for the coming year, if we haven't already gotten those decisions made. I tend to spend a lot of time at the computer at this time of year, running reports, calculating budgets and running balance sheets.

These are all the things that the accountant and the banker need from us. It's not my favorite time of the year, but it has to be done.

Because work on the farm is slower at this time of year, Robb has returned to his off-season job of hauling hogs. He doesn't have the time to do a lot of this during spring planting and fall harvest, but it's something he has time for in the winter.

He uses his semi and livestock trailer (normally called a livestock pot) to haul hogs to market. He works on contract for a small private company, so he gets paid by the load and the mileage, and the jobs come randomly throughout the week. Luckily, it's very flexible work, so he can choose which days he works and avoid other family commitments.

Hauling hogs is big business in Iowa, for obvious reasons. Iowa is the largest hog-producing state in the country. We grow a lot of bacon! All those hogs must eventually be moved from the barns where they are fed to the harvest plants where they become the meat you buy in the stores. Market hogs now average about 280-300 pounds when they head to the harvest plant, and an average hog load is 160-165 hogs. You may remember me writing before about us loading out our hogs from our buildings, and we may load out two, three or four loads per day when we send them out. That's a lot of pork on the roads!

Robb drives to the farms where the hogs are growing and loads a full load into the pot. These

pots are double-deckers and have the most amazing system of gates and ramps inside to make use of every possible inch of space. Hogs inside the trailers are penned into groups, and each group has to be loaded and unloaded in order so that the gates and ramps can swing around. They have wood chip bedding for comfort and to keep them warm. At this time of year, the trailer sides are mostly covered by slats, which block up the large holes in the metal and keep the pigs warmer. Those holes are needed in the summertime for ventilation when it's hot.

Robb then drives his full load to the designated harvest plant, where they are all unloaded. Then he has to go have his trailer completely washed out to remove all the wood chips and hog manure before he can get another load. If he were hauling baby pigs instead of market hogs, the trailer would have to be disinfected as well to prevent disease transfer from one barn to another. In the case of market hogs, this is not as much of a problem. This concern for disease is also a reason that the drivers generally don't go into the hog buildings to load the pigs. They don't want to accidentally carry disease from one barn to another on their clothes or boots. Robb also avoids going into our hog buildings after hauling a load of pigs for the same reason.

There are many regulations controlling livestock haulers in Iowa. They have to be trained on careful and humane handling of animals. They are limited as to how many hogs they can haul at a time and how far they can haul them. The drivers are also limited on how many hours they can drive per day, just like all other semi drivers. Most livestock drivers try not to stop at all on their route, so that they keep the ventilation going for the pigs in back, and so that they get them off the trailer as quickly as possible. As a funny side note, the drivers hauling livestock pots are known in the trucking world for having some of the fanciest trucks with big motors and lots of lights on their trucks and trailers — it's a matter of pride in their job and their appearance I think.

Now you know a little bit more about those loads of hogs that you see driving around on the highways. They are an essential part of the livestock system in Iowa, and you certainly wouldn't have bacon in your grocery store if it wasn't for them.



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