

Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 sets box-office records

David Walsh
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The WSWS will post a review of Fahrenheit 9/11 by David Walsh tomorrow.

American director Michael Moore's documentary indictment of the Bush administration, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, set box-office records in its first few days in North American cinemas.

The subject of unprecedented anticipation and concerted right-wing attacks, *Fahrenheit 9/11* set single-day records at its two New York City venues on its opening day June 23. The film sold \$49,000 worth of tickets at the Loew's Village 7 in Manhattan, beating the theater's single-day previous record set by Hollywood blockbuster *Men in Black*, and more than \$30,000 at the Lincoln Plaza theater, topping the total established at that cinema by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

The success in New York was followed up nationwide over the weekend when Moore's film opened in 868 theaters in the US and Canada. Despite playing in a relatively small number of theaters (and many of them smaller, art-house venues), *Fahrenheit 9/11* outperformed all other films and was number one at the box office, grossing an estimated \$21.8 million in three days. The number-two film, *White Chicks*, opened in 2,726 theaters.

Fahrenheit 9/11 surpassed the domestic box-office record for a documentary—set by Moore's own *Bowling for Columbine* over the course of 10 months—in its first three days. Analysts are predicting a possible \$100 million domestic box office, an unheard-of figure for a non-fiction film.

Paul Dergarabedian, president of a company that tracks box office returns, told the *Washington Post* that he was particularly impressed by the per-theater average of \$25,115: "I'm amazed at those numbers. That type of per-theater average is usually reserved for a blockbuster." *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s opening was the highest ever for a film opening in fewer than 1,000 screens.

Film industry experts had predicted much lower numbers for Moore's documentary. *Variety* had forecast a \$10 million opening weekend. Market research had indicated that the film would rank second or third, behind two commercial comedies, *White Chicks* and *Dodgeball* (which was playing in 3,020 theaters). An executive with the studio that produced *White Chicks* told the *New York Times*, "This picture [Moore's] came from nowhere. It's what movie viewing has become. If you make it feel like it has urgency, people will have to go."

Tom Ortenberg of Lions Gate, one of the distributors that picked up *Fahrenheit 9/11* after Disney refused to allow its own division, Miramax, to release it, told the press during a conference call Sunday, "[We had the] number one gross in virtually every, and possibly every, theater we were in.... [We did] extremely well in every single theater we are in."

Ortenberg commented, "The film played brilliantly in the red states and in the blue states [referring to states dominated by the Republicans and Democrats, respectively], in the big towns and the small towns. We literally sold out Peoria, Illinois, and Fayetteville, North Carolina. I take my hat off to Michael Moore."

Moore noted that Fayetteville was the home of Fort Bragg, adding, "We sold out in Army-base towns. We set house records in some of these places. We set single-day records in a number of theaters. We got standing ovations in Greensboro, North Carolina."

The director said, "Republican states are embracing the movie, and it's sold out in Republican strongholds all over the country."

Speaking of the overall figures, Moore told the media, "These are mind-blowing numbers. All the predictions that the movie would only speak to the choir, would only be for those who don't like Bush, I don't think they have turned out to be true." He observed with some legitimacy that *Fahrenheit 9/11* "became part of the national conversation this weekend."

Exit surveys in 15 cities indicated that 91 percent of respondents gave the film an "excellent" rating, while 93 percent said they would "definitely recommend" the film, numbers that were the best Ortenberg said he had ever seen. The core audience was split between male and female and its largest component was 25 to 34 years old.

The distributors plan to add a few hundred theaters this weekend, when it will compete with one of the summer blockbusters, *Spiderman 2*. Moore joked, "We look forward to joining with *Spiderman* to bringing truth and justice all across America."

The reception to *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a genuine political phenomenon and shatters a series of myths propagated by the US media and the political establishment, including the Democratic Party leadership. It demolishes once and for all the

notion that George W. Bush is an immensely popular figure, that the war in Iraq is backed by the American people and that some right-wing consensus dominates the US.

These myths have been used to intimidate and silence opposition. With their voices entirely excluded from the media and the official political arena, opponents of the war and the Bush administration were intended to feel like a small and isolated group, wandering in the wilderness. Audience members turning up for Moore's film have had the experience of discovering that masses of other people share the same hostility for the war and for US government policies.

Press reports from around the US give some indication of the response to the film, and to its denunciations of the Bush administration's foreign policy.

One moviegoer in Alabama said his local cinema in Mobile was filled to capacity, despite living in an area where, he said, "even the liberals are conservative." The viewer added: "I heard something I have never heard at a movie in Mobile before—applause. Giant, cheerful applause as the credits began to roll for a film that I was just sure I'd have the theatre to myself for."

In Texas, audiences were large and enthusiastic. One Texan filmgoer told the press: "Living in Houston, heart of Bush country, my whole family including in-laws piled into three cars and went to the opening.... [W]e were surprised to find the showing sold out at the first theatre, but managed to find seats at the second we tried.

"We loved the movie, which gave us real hope that freedom and democracy will return to this great country in November [at the presidential election]. The audience gave a long ovation at the end."

Viewers in Washington, D.C., apparently invaded cinemas as the movie opened. At a 14-screen multiplex theatre in Georgetown, in the heart of the capital, the movie was being shown on three screens. Tickets had been sold out for days, and some people were forced to sit on the floor.

A 29-year-old bartender, Anthony Branch, told the *Washington Post* that the film had helped him better understand "what's really going on.... I feel he [Bush] just lied about everything."

Alan Wilenski, 50, an "ardent Bush-Cheney supporter," told *New York Newsday* at a screening in Farmingdale, New York, that the film had "really given me pause to think about what's really going on. There was just too much—too much to discount."

"He's not making fun of the administration. He's speaking the truth," Richard Arrucci, 68, of Dix Hills told *Newsday*. "I'm hoping a lot of people will see it and it will affect the outcome of the election." Speaking of Moore, Suzanne Defree, 26, of East Northport commented, "He's never really been pro-Republican, but I certainly trust Michael Moore more than I trust the president."

Eugene Hernandez of *indieWIRE* wrote: "Just as in many

theaters across the country, large crowds gathered to see the movie in Times Square [in New York City] on Friday night. Venue staff at the AMC Empire 25 theaters on 42nd St. seemed overwhelmed by the crowds that arrived early and gathered in the walkways outside theaters. A projectionist at the venue told *indieWIRE* Friday night that the theater was adding additional screenings after midnight to accommodate the demand for the film."

The local newspaper in Wise County, Virginia, in the southwestern part of the state, reported, "*Fahrenheit 9/11*, the controversial movie/documentary by Michael Moore, is packing the Cinemall Theater in rural southwestern Virginia.... Abingdon Cinemall Theater audiences have ended every showing with a large applause at its conclusion, according to reports.... Most of the Cinemall audiences in Abingdon appear to be averaging 40-to-50-ish in age grouping with one exiting viewer saying 'the film should be seen by any free-thinking American prior to entering the presidential polling booth. *Fahrenheit 9/11* puts events of the past four years in context that many Americans have refused or feared to realize.' "

The *Cincinnati Enquirer* reported: "Though specific takes at local theaters were not available, managers at the Showcase Cinemas in Western Hills, Kenwood Towne Centre and AMC Theatres Newport on the Levee all reported brisk crowds.

" 'It was definitely our No. 1 film,' said AMC manager Brandon Ferguson. Audiences spanned many demographics, though the Friday and Saturday night crowds were largely youthful. The crowds laughed, sighed, and scoffed throughout the movie, bursting into applause at the end."

Rob Borsellino of the *Des Moines [Iowa] Register* described a screening of the film in his city: "The 500-seat theater was sold out, and at the end of the movie the crowd was applauding, cheering. They'd just sat through Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and there was unity in the room. A feeling that somebody was finally able to say what a lot of folks have been thinking."

The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported: "Outside the Neptune Theater in Seattle's University District, hundreds of moviegoers transformed the sidewalk into a sort of mini-convention. Activists had no trouble selling anti-Bush buttons and stickers and pitching various campaigns and causes."

Lila Rapcewicz, the first in line for a sold-out afternoon show June 25, told the newspaper after the film showing, "I feel more like my gut feeling has come true. We're basically just living under a lie right now." The paper reports: "The Neptune burst with cheers from the moment the lights dimmed until the closing credits. It sounded like a rally, with even a bit of chanting at the end."



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