Against the Odds, Smart Films Thrive at the Box Office

By MANOHLA DARGIS
Published: December 14, 2012

SEEN any good movies lately? How could you not? This has been a bumper year for movies big and small, imported and domestic, some made for hundreds of millions of dollars and others made for about the price of a grande soy latte. As has been the case in recent years, the top box office movies in America were mostly formulaic corporate entertainments, including the superhero comic-book fantasies like “Marvel’s The Avengers” that make some critics despair. Even amid the usual selection of big-screen cartoons and testosterone, though, it was nice to see female-driven stories like “The Hunger Games” — and all the female viewers its box office represents — muscling into the mix.

Look past the Top 20 on boxofficemojo.com, and things become more interesting. The 21st domestic top grosser of the year was the little male stripper movie that could and did, all while flashing its viewers: “Magic Mike,” directed by that cinematic chameleon Steven Soderbergh, was one of the unexpectedly enjoyable movies of the year and one of the most surprisingly profitable. Made on the cheap, the independently bankrolled production was bought by Warner Brothers for about $7 million and scooped up $113 million in the United States. It’s a shining, sweat-kissed example of how the studios could diversify their offerings and maybe their audiences by doing more than remaking the same movies over again, as Sony Pictures did with the perfectly adequate if misleadingly titled “Amazing Spider-Man.”