

High drama

It has been a rollercoaster 12 months for the film industry – with all the highs and lows of an Academy Award-winning plot. **Sean Wilson** studies the slate for the next act

It was no ordinary year in the movie industry. Despite beginning with that infamous Academy Award Best Picture mix-up between *La La Land* and *Moonlight*, any chapter that ushers in the patriarchy-smashing blockbuster success of *Wonder Woman*, plus a whole host of other remarkable talking points, is surely one for the record books.

This was a period of feverishly discussed transitions in the industry. There were, of course, the expected box office tent pole winners, franchise continuations

such as *Fast 8*, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* and *Spider-Man: Homecoming* all grossing upwards of \$700m worldwide. The ready-made audience for *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* saw it soar past the \$1bn mark internationally.

Disney's Emma Watson-fronted *Beauty and the Beast* remake became one of the year's true sensations however; grossing more than \$1bn worldwide. *Wonder Woman* director Patty Jenkins flew the flag for equal representation in comic book cinema, utilising star Gal Gadot's charisma to fashion

one of the most entertaining and culturally impactful blockbusters of the year.

Topicality was the order of the day, particularly in horror cinema. Jordan Peele's sensational feature film debut *Get Out* was less a box office success than a watershed moment in pop culture. Encapsulating discussions of liberal racism and prejudice, it became one of the biggest horror movies of all time, grossing \$250m against a \$4m budget. Later in the year, Stephen King's *IT* became one of the most popular adaptations of the

author's work. Grossing more than \$600m globally, additional critical raves underlined its topical themes of paranoia and trauma.

Meanwhile, several Bollywood releases proved strong contenders. Acclaimed drama *Secret Superstar* drew critical plaudits and financial rewards. This story of an aspiring young singer touched on a host of themes including violence and gender equality, becoming 2017's highest-grossing Bollywood release with 900 Crore in the bank.

With Anushka Shetty starring, *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* broke records to become one of the most financially successful Indian movies ever. War epic *Tubelight* survived mixed reviews to gross 211 Crore.

In stark contrast, audiences also sent out a clear message about what they didn't want. Universal's planned *Dark Universe* series had a stake put through its chances after the disastrous box office performance of Tom Cruise vehicle *The Mummy*. Michael Bay's fifth *Transformers* movie *The Last Knight* was the lowest grossing since the original back in 2007. Likewise, the fifth *Pirates of the Caribbean*

Right: There may have been a mix up in the Oscars, but Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling were superb **Right:** Emma Watson starred in *Beauty and the Beast*



failed to recoup the booty of its predecessors.

So what of 2018? Well it's started on the highest of possible notes with Marvel's *Black Panther*. The critically acclaimed, box office-shattering blockbuster has capitalised on its ground-breaking black ensemble cast, plus the input of *Creed* director Ryan Coogler, to emerge as something more than a superhero epic. Indeed, it's a cultural talking point, a watershed moment in terms of diversity and representation in our big screen movie culture. All-consuming comic book ensemble epics like *Avengers: Infinity War* are likely to continue as unstoppable success stories. And with Disney's deal to purchase 21st Century Fox and its accompanying properties (*X-Men* etc.), their market stranglehold looks set to increase.

This year's atypically diverse Oscars slate is perhaps one of the clearest indicators yet of a sea change in Hollywood, with Mudbound's Rachel Morrison becoming the first ever female cinematographer to be nominated, and Greta Gerwig becoming the first woman filmmaker to be nominated for their directorial debut (*Lady Bird*). Just as significant was the Best Original Screenplay win for *Get Out*. Writer-director Jordan Peele became the first ever African-American recipient of the award, a powerful sign of how much his film has permeated the consciousness. Plus, with the Best Picture and Best Director wins for *The Shape of Water* (Guillermo del Toro winning his first), the industry appears to be waking up to the latent potential in sci-fi and fantasy cinema, which at its best can act as an engrossing mirror of the times in which we live. ■

