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The Tragedy of The Last Duel Flopping at the Box Office

Ridley Scott's *The Last Duel* is the rarest of things in modern Hollywood: an epic for adults. And it just sank like a stone at the box office.



By [David Crow](#) | October 18, 2021 |

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Photo: 20th Century Studios

The Last Duel did not have a good weekend at the box office. As a medieval epic from director Ridley Scott for the post-#MeToo era, the 20th Century Studios release posted a meager \$4.8 million over its first three days in release. And that is on a reported budget of \$100 million—a figure which does not include marketing and publicity costs.

There are many aspects that likely contributed to ***The Last Duel***'s box office failure. The pandemic, for one, has left the movie industry on uncertain footing for nearly two years, a period of time where Scott's pricy melodrama had already been greenlit and filming before the ground fell out beneath the feet of theatrical

releases. While recent franchise spectacles like *Venom: Let There Be Carnage*, *No Time to Die*, and *Shang-Chi* are doing big business, audiences appear still recalcitrant about venturing to cinemas for adult-skewing dramatic work. Indeed, older audiences are particularly shy about moviegoing with the spread of the Delta variant this fall, and more than half of *The Last Duel*'s audience skewed age 35 or older. When the subject matter is also as uncomfortable as that of *The Last Duel*'s—with the film centering on a legally sanctioned duel in 14th century France after one knight is accused of raping another's wife—getting younger audiences to show up is all the more difficult.

Additionally, there will likely be some second-guessing about the rollout by Disney/20th Century Studios. While I can anecdotally attest it was hard to miss awareness of the film's arrival due to omnipresent sporting event TV ads in recent weeks, as well as some pricy digital billboard real estate space being used in New York City's Times Square, the release didn't necessarily feel like the premiere of a must-see Oscar contender. This was all the stranger given the fair amount of deserved critical praise for Jodie Comer's devastating turn in the film as Marguerite de Carrouges. Setting the film opposite the seasonal event of *Halloween Kills*, and one week after the also older-skewing blockbuster *No Time to Die*, also didn't do it any favors.

And yet, whatever the reasons for its flopping, *The Last Duel*'s new status as a major box office bomb is a bitter thing for cinema in its own right. One that will have greater repercussions than just diminishing this particular movie's Oscar prospects.

The Last Duel, which was written by Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, and Nicole Holofcener, was surprisingly refreshing when I saw it several weeks ago in a theater. With the typically lavish production designs you'd expect from a Scott period piece, it felt like the type of Hollywood epic that rarely gets made anymore. Similarly, the screenwriters' *Rashomon*-inspired storytelling structure, where we witness the events leading up to the duel from the vantage of the film's quarreling knights (Damon and Adam Driver), and then the actual woman at the center of this horrible melodrama (Comer), was a striking way of drawing parallels between the barbaric patriarchal double standards of the Middle Ages and those in our own still often tragically flawed cultures.

Made with the pomp and grandeur of films that were once clear blockbusters, such as Scott's own *Gladiator* (2000) or *Master and Commander* (2003), and with an uncomfortable yet proactive subject matter that used to still be the stuff of popular adult dramas like *The Accused* (1988) or Scott's own *Thelma & Louise* (1991), *The Last Duel* feels in some ways like a relic of the past: a splashy period piece marketed on the appeal of its

movie star cast and harrowing subject. On paper, Damon and Affleck are still A-list movie stars, with the latter fresh off being a relatively popular Batman. The film also marks the pair's first screenplay together since their Oscar winning script for *Good Will Hunting* (1997), and Driver just did a three-film stint as Kylo Ren in the \$4.3 billion-grossing *Star Wars* Sequel Trilogy.

But all that prestige and box office success in franchise entertainment can't even translate to a \$5 million opening weekend for something that's adult-skewing and divorced from intellectual property.

There are a myriad of reasons for why this particular movie might've flopped, including some audiences being fairly turned off by its subject matter. But whether one considers *The Last Duel* an artistic success in how it handles this material, or a middle brow attempt by a male director at telling a sensitive story about a woman's suffering, the film's failure sends a strong and far simpler message to Hollywood: Expensive, ambitious movies made for adults lose money. Pandemic or not, audiences will show up in droves for familiar franchises and/or superheroes—hence *Venom 2* nearly breaking the October opening weekend record earlier this month, and *Shang-Chi* shattering September's last month. But a movie dealing with adult themes and challenging ideas, even with the gruesome sword-on-shield carnage that made Scott's *Gladiator* a box office and Oscar champ 20 years ago?

That's dead on arrival for audiences who'd rather play in fantasy's PG-13 sandbox, or with *Venom's* big ball of CGI goo.

On social media, I've already seen some suggesting that *The Last Duel* should have been a streaming release. And there's some cold, despairing logic to that. Older audiences who might be attracted to a movie like *The Last Duel* are more inclined to stay home and watch whatever's on Netflix, especially after the pandemic. However, save for the rare instances when Netflix wants to invest in its own prestige, Oscar-courting showcases, finding a streaming service willing to spend this type of money that can produce such an old school spectacle with the type of craft that goes into *The Last Duel* is rare.

Getting to see such filmmaking on the big screen's sprawling canvas, with the images skewing toward drama and painful emotions instead of dopamine-tickling popcorn, is rarer still. And with movies like *The Last Duel* flopping, such projects could soon become outright extinct. Which is a shame when those projects produce things as powerful as Comer's harrowing performance—or Affleck's delightfully decadent one. In fact, for those who love cinema, it can be its own type of minor tragedy.