ROM-COMS MAKE MONEY. WHY IS HOLLYWOOD SO AFRAID TO PUT THEM IN THEATERS?

As Hollywood continues to fight for ticket sales, filmmakers tell *Rolling Stone* romances could offer relief — if studios would take it

By CT JONES

APRIL 16, 2026

'Crazy Rich Asians,' 'You, Me & Tuscany,' 'Anyone But You'SANJA BUCKO/© WARNER BROS. PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION; GIULIA PARMIGIANI /© UNIVERSAL PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION; BROOK RUSHTON /© SONY PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION

The essence of a great romantic comedy is a formula so well known that most people could describe it before they finish reading this sentence. Start with two bona fide movie stars — in chemistry if not in name — build an hour of ratcheting will-they-won't-they tension, throw in some zany side quests, and you've got yourself an A-plus crowd-pleaser. They're light. They're fun. They're beloved. And they're also rarely released in theaters anymore.

It's been close to 30 years since Hollywood was flooded with theatrical rom-com releases. Gone are the days when you could catch movies like *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *Pretty Woman* (1990), and *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) on the big screen. Rom-coms today are mostly relegated to streaming services, just another drop in a sea of on-demand content. In recent years, there's been a resurgence of interest in the genre, with surprise hits like 2018's *Crazy Rich Asians* and the 2022 Sydney Sweeney-Glen Powell vehicle *Anyone But You* pulling big box-office numbers ($238 million and **$200 million** in global sales, respectively). But several filmmakers tell *Rolling Stone* studios are still hesitant to put their full weight behind romance projects, even with that evidence of financial success. The release of *You, Me, & Tuscany* on April 10 stands as a new test case for whether or not audiences will file in behind a romantic comedy. But it also begs another question — why does Hollywood think rom-coms are still too much of a risk?

"It's fucking frustrating," says Yulin Kuang, a writer on **Netflix**'s recent rom-com *People We Meet on Vacation* and director of the upcoming Emily Henry adaption *Beach Read*. "I think everybody's a coward. Romance is something that does well in theaters, because we're starved for it. We want it so bad. Fans will show up as long as you give them a good movie."

For the Hollywood execs who haven't abandoned the theatrical system as a lost cause, it's clear that filling theater seats has become a desperate mission; the only risks they seem willing to take are on superhero movies — which they see as barely a risk at all. The humble rom-com is never going to rake in the cash that major IP and superhero films do. But box-office figures from the past five years show a steep decline in audience interest in the status quo. The last three Marvel theatrical releases, *Captain America: Brave New World* , *Thunderbolts*, and *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*, all out last year, saw **stark drop-offs** in their second weeks, leaving them as some of Marvel's least profitable films. While these profits ($415 million, $371 million, and $500 million, respectively) still outrank even the most popular of rom-coms, they're also a clear indication in changing audience desires.

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In comparison, romantic comedies often have incredibly small budgets, which makes it easy to recoup investments. The Julia Roberts and George Clooney helmed rom-com ***Ticket to Paradise*** (2022) made $168 million on a $60 million budget. *The Lost City*, a 2022 action rom-com with Sandra Bullock and Channing Tatum, **made $192.9 million** on a $68 million budget. *Bridget Jones: Mad About The Boy* made **$140 million** on its estimated $50 million budget from overseas ticket sales alone, making the lack of a theatrical release in the U.S. feel like a missed opportunity.

This gap between production costs and potential profit historically has given studios incentive to make more romances, not fewer — and to pave the way for surprise hits. Perhaps the best example is *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. The film, which premiered in 2002, was made on an indie budget of $5 million. It was a massive hit, bringing in $350 million worldwide and becoming one of the highest-grossing rom-coms of all time. In today's romance-skeptical Hollywood, it likely would never make it to theaters.

In a 2022 interview, director Judd Apatow noted that the studio system works best when small projects like romances are made in addition to the superhero giants, not left out entirely. "Overall, the studio system wants movies that make a billion dollars, and that's where a great percentage of their focus is," he **told *The Hollywood Reporter***. "But if you're spending a lot of money on an action franchise, it is important for all the studios to hedge bets with smaller-budgeted movies that have the potential to have big upsides."

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Despite mounting evidence that audiences are returning to the genre, it's still tough for filmmakers to find institutional support for romantic projects. Just last week, writer-director Nina Lee **sparked almost 48 hours of discourse** on Twitter when she claimed that several studio execs told her they want to see how *You, Me & Tuscany* performs at the box office before giving her an answer on her new romantic comedy, *That's Her,* a rom-com starring Coco Jones and Kountry Wayne.

"On the money side, there's a chance to really reap what you've sown into your project going the theatrical route, especially with a low-budget film like ours," Lee tells *Rolling Stone*. "Rom-coms typically make their money back. It doesn't need $300 million to turn profit. I don't know why studios are so afraid of it."

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One possible factor: that studio pressure grows exponentially when films have people of color as the leads. In 2019, after the runaway success of *Crazy Rich Asians*, director John M. Chu told *Variety*, "We weren't allowed to fail on this one. I hope that burden is lifted; I hope it's lightened the pressure on other films." Sadly, it doesn't seem to have had a lasting effect on the rom-com landscape.

With studios desperate to churn out mega-blockbusters as fast as they can, it's no surprise that there's a reluctance to look to the romance genre as a life raft. And let's face it, not all rom-coms will be a hit. But if Hollywood keeps sidelining romances, Kuang says, it's thwarting classics that will never get to be.

"If you put *You've Got Mail* through [today's studio system], would it survive intact the way we love it? Would it even get greenlit? Would a Meg Ryan or a Tom Hanks say yes?" Kuang asks. "When you make cynical decisions, you make cynical art. And people can sense that."