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'Ishtar' Lands on Mars



Walt Disney Pictures

The science-fiction film "John Carter," starring Taylor Kitsch, cost an estimated \$350 million to make and market.

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LOS ANGELES — In 1987, shortly before the release of "Ishtar," Columbia Pictures realized the film was going to flop in catastrophic fashion. But rather than cut advertising spending to minimize the financial damage — as the studio's top marketer advised — Columbia did the opposite, pouring even more money into ads. The reason? The studio was desperate to stay on good terms with the two stars of "Ishtar," Warren Beatty and Dustin Hoffman. "Ego trumps logic in Hollywood," said Peter Sealey, who was Columbia's marketing chief at the time.

Studios have repeatedly pledged in the 25 years since to modernize their clubby business practices, but the more Hollywood promises change, the deeper it seems to fall into its ruts — as evidenced by "John Carter," a big-budget science fiction epic from Walt Disney Studios that opened Friday and flopped over the weekend. Disney spent lavishly (some say foolishly) on the movie in large part to appease one of its most important creative talents: Andrew Stanton, the Pixar-based director of "Finding Nemo" and "Wall-E."

"John Carter," which cost an estimated \$350 million to make and market, and was directed by Mr. Stanton, took in about \$30.6 million at the North American box office, according to Rentrak, which compiles box-office data. That result is so poor that analysts estimate that Disney will be forced

to take a quarterly write-down of \$100 million to \$165 million. The amount will depend on ticket sales overseas, where “John Carter” took in about \$71 million over the weekend, a better total than Disney had feared.

Profitability for “John Carter” was always a steep climb. Because of its enormous cost and the way ticket sales are split with theaters, analysts say the film needs to take in more than \$600 million globally to break even. The only silver lining for Disney may be a dubious one: last March the studio’s “Mars Needs Moms” flopped so badly that it also required a write-down, making year-on-year performance comparisons less brutal.

In recent weeks, as a weak marketing campaign failed to generate audience excitement for “John Carter,” Robert A. Iger, Disney’s chief executive, made it clear in conversations with senior managers that he would not tolerate finger-pointing; this may be a colossal miss, he told them, according to people who were present, but it’s the company’s miss and no individuals would be blamed — including Mr. Stanton. Learn from it, was Mr. Iger’s message.

On Sunday, Rich Ross, chairman of Walt Disney Studios, said in a statement, “Moviemaking does not come without risk. It’s still an art, not a science, and there is no proven formula for success. Andrew Stanton is an incredibly talented and successful filmmaker who with his team put their hard work and vision into the making of ‘John Carter.’ Unfortunately, it failed to connect with audiences as much as we had all hoped.” Mr. Stanton declined to comment for this article.

It is true that no one mistake created “John Carter.” Still, interviews with current and former Disney executives paint a relatively stark portrait of responsibility, starting with Mr. Stanton and extending to studio managers — many of them inexperienced in their jobs — who gave him creative carte blanche. Although Mr. Stanton was promised independence, his contract did not give him what Hollywood calls final cut, or complete control over the finished film.

Mr. Stanton received a green light to proceed on “John Carter” in 2009 by Richard W. Cook, then Disney’s studio chairman. There were red flags from the beginning. Mr. Stanton had never directed a live-action movie before. He wanted to cast no-name actors. And the screenplay, based on a story by Edgar Rice Burroughs that was serialized in 1912 and later published in book form as “A Princess of Mars,” was a bewildering mash-up, starting during the Civil War and moving to the Old West before leaping to a planet called Barsoom (Mars), home to tusked, four-armed creatures called Tharks.

But Mr. Stanton passionately lobbied to make the movie, and there was a compelling argument to say yes, Disney officials said. His story pitch was simple and gripping: “Indiana Jones on Mars.” Big payoffs in the movie business typically come from big gambles, and the thinking among some at the studio was that this could be Disney’s “Avatar.” Moreover, Mr. Stanton, whose writing credits include “Monsters, Inc.” and all three “Toy Story” movies, had a strong track record with difficult material. People were skeptical about “Wall-E,” about a computer that does not talk, but Mr. Stanton turned it into a blockbuster with more than \$521 million in global ticket sales. There were also prerelease doubts about “Finding Nemo,” which took in \$868 million. Both won Oscars.

Didn’t he deserve the benefit of the doubt? If Disney gave Mr. Stanton rope, he certainly ran with it. Accustomed to reworking scenes over and over at Pixar, he did not take well to the usual constraints of live-action — nailing it the first time — and went back for at least two lengthy reshoots. “The thing I had to explain to Disney was, ‘You’re asking a guy who’s only known how to do it this way to suddenly do it with one reshoot,’ ” [he told](#) The Los Angeles Times. “I said, ‘I’m not gonna get it right the first time. I’ll tell you that right now.’ ” Mr. Stanton leaned heavily on his colleagues at Disney-owned Pixar for guidance, paying less attention to input from people with experience in live-action filmmaking, according to people who worked on the movie. To be fair, though, Disney managers did not have a wealth of live-action experience on which to draw. Mr. Iger had fired Mr. Cook (for reasons unrelated to “John Carter”) and replaced him with Rich Ross, a television executive. Mr. Ross, who arrived shortly before Mr. Stanton began filming, had never overseen production of a big-budget movie before. Mr. Ross hired lieutenants who were also inexperienced in managing filmmakers, notably Sean Bailey as head of production and MT Carney as marketing chief.

Supporters of Mr. Ross concede that he faced a steep learning curve, but insist he had no choice but to let Mr. Stanton proceed; “John Carter” had been in preproduction for a year by the time he arrived. They pointed to Mr. Ross’s recent standoff with Gore Verbinski over the budget of a “Lone Ranger” remake as evidence that he can stand up to strong-willed directors — and jolt the studio out of its rut — when necessary.

Regardless, when push came to shove on “John Carter,” Mr. Stanton usually got his way. One area in which he exerted his influence was marketing, where he frequently rejected ideas from Ms. Carney and her team, according to people who worked on the film. He insisted, for instance, that [a Led Zeppelin song](#) be used in a trailer, rejecting concerns that a decades-old rock tune did not make the material feel current. Mr. Stanton also was behind the selection of billboard imagery that fell flat, and he controlled an important presentation of footage at a Disney fan convention that got a chilly reception.

By the time “John Carter” had its Los Angeles premiere last month, the film had suffered months of ridicule on the Internet and had taken on a funereal aura. “I’ve never had something healthy get treated like a corpse,” Mr. Ross [told Variety](#). Mr. Stanton [brushed off skeptics](#) at the premiere, saying, “You just gotta trust us.”

Reviews were not as blistering as some had expected, but they were not good, with critics calling the film a hectic hybrid of other movies: “Avatar” meets “Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace” meets “Gladiator” meets “Prince of Persia” meets any of John Ford’s westerns. Mr. Stanton has two “John Carter” sequels planned, but those ambitions are now almost assuredly derailed.

If Mr. Stanton has any comfort, it may be that he keeps good company in the trophy-movie-gone-wrong hall of fame. Baz Luhrmann is there for “Australia,” along with George Lucas for “Howard the Duck” and Michael Cimino for “Heaven’s Gate.” And, of course, Mr. Hoffman and Mr. Beatty for “Ishtar.”

Ishtar Sink, Venus. The jungles of Venus conceal great treasures and terrible power. Map Points. Endless Steps. Headlands. Ishtar Academy. The Cinders. Ember Caves. Just beyond their warbase, Valus Taaurc, Fleet Commander of the Cabal Siege Dancers, hides in an Imperial Land Tank. Fight through his guard and stop this terror before he destroys all of Freehold. Difficulty: Normal.

Curiosity lands on Mars! NASA successfully delivered a \$2.5 billion robotic vehicle to Mars, one that will explore for signs that the planet might once have hosted life. Janet Raloff. Aug 8, 2012 3:17 pm EST. Artist's drawing of Curiosity on the Martian surface. NASA.

On August 5, after a journey lasting more than 8 months, a carlike rover carefully settled down onto the surface of Mars. The vehicle is basically a science lab. And that, he says, almost immediately raises the question: "Could life have evolved on Mars?" And if it could, he asks: "Did life evolve? How far did it evolve? And where is it now?" There's no reason to suspect Earth is the only place to host life, Elachi told Drake. "I'm pretty sure life is there across the universe," he said. "But as a scientist, you have to prove it." LOS ANGELES In 1987, shortly before the release of "Ishtar," Columbia Pictures realized the film was going to flop in catastrophic fashion. But rather than cut advertising spending to minimize the financial damage as the studio's top marketer advised, Columbia did the opposite, pouring even more money into ads. The reason? The studio was desperate to stay on good terms with the two stars of "Ishtar," Warren Beatty and Dustin Hoffman. "Ego trumps logic in Hollywood," said Peter Sealey, who was Columbia's marketing chief at the time. A version of this article appears in print on March 12, 2012, on Page B1 of the New York edition with the headline: "Ishtar" Lands on Mars. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe. Continue reading the main story.