

TIGHTS IN A TWIST

Rival tentpoles test limits of studios' franchise factory

By TED JOHNSON

A year or so ago, Bryan Singer was working feverishly on a third edition of the "X-Men" franchise when he suddenly jumped from Fox to Warner Bros. to take over "Superman." Shortly thereafter, Brett Ratner, who'd been working on "Superman," jumped over to Fox to take on "X-Men 3: The Last Stand."

This summer's battle of the comicbook blockbusters comes down to the Bryan-and-Brett show, with roughly half a billion dollars in production and print and ad costs on the line.

The switcheroo may be less a coincidence than a symptom of the uphill battle that any studio faces in trying to revive a lucrative and pricey franchise whose pricetag can run into hundreds of millions of dollars.

The value of these tentpoles can't be measured just in terms of B.O. and DVD sales — or in their cultural cachet as prime movers of the dueling D.C. and Marvel comicbook dynasties.

The hope is that each will lead to a legacy of projects. "Last Stand" is the final "X-Men" film and Fox hopes to spin off characters into their own pics; Warner Bros., as it returns to an important franchise, is in talks with Singer to direct a

After endless noise and speculation, the two pics are ready for their bows, with both studios expressing great enthusiasm.

and even a wider network of licensing and promotion.

By the time "Superman Returns" comes out June 30, the "S" logo will be used to sell everything from soft drinks to motor oil. And toy manufacturers hope that products like the Superman InflatoSuit will help revive a sluggish licensing industry.

In style and substance, each director has unique capabilities. Singer, 40, and Ratner, 37, both come with oversized, charismatic personalities (Singer speaks to the set via a voice-of-God-like microphone; Ratner is notorious for juggling as many as three cell phones simultaneously); an affinity for the nightlife; a special skill at working within the system; and, perhaps most important, a knack for showmanship.

Singer chronicled his experience making "Superman" in an

antic-filled video blog on bluetights.net. Ratner sent out holiday cards with him dressed as X-Men's Wolverine, surrounded by the other mutants.

The projects still generate almost daily noise and speculation, such as "Superman's" long and occasionally disorganized shoot. (Warners execs say they're more than pleased with the results). Fan sites, meanwhile, have mused on such things as the size of Halle Berry's role (small in the first two, bigger in No. 3) and the size of Superman's bulge.

And, as with all high-profile projects, there is speculation on the budget. Sources say the budget of "X-Men" hovers near

\$150 million. WB says "Superman" cost \$184 million. But as any studio vet can tell you, quoted figures have a way of being much different from actual costs.

Singer's stamp is all over the first two "X-Men" pics, and when he ankleed the franchise, Fox turned to "Layer Cake" director Matthew Vaughn. But Vaughn backed out of "X-Men 3," reportedly because he didn't want to relocate his family to Vancouver for the length of the shoot.

Ratner was hired when the film was in pre-production. He was an unknown factor to the actors who'd been in the first two. "It's always a test with great acting talent," says Marvel CEO Avi Arad, a producer on the pic. "But the talent got to meet and know him. If they had gotten uncomfortable, we would have

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Brandon Routh in "Superman Returns"



Hugh Jackman in "X-Men 3: The Last Stand." Fox calls it a "thinking person's action film."

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SUMMER CAPES OF GOOD HOPE

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had a problem. But Brett is a real actor's director."

Fox is straying from the usual marketing conventions. Studio is trying to brand the tentpole as a "thinking person's action film," in the words of studio co-chairman Tom Rothman.

Downplaying doubts expressed on a few noisy Internet sites, Fox notes that the franchise has been embraced by geeks and fans; a recently unveiled trailer, studio execs say, has been well received. And the pic has the brand recognition after the first two, which grossed \$700 million worldwide.

The marketing pitch is darker and more ambiguous than those of its predecessors. The plot, which hinges on what happens when a "cure" for mutantcy is developed, explores big ideas about identity and race. The posters and billboards are as moody as a fashion shoot. They show isolated X-Men characters posed against the somewhat cryptic copyline, "Take a Stand." The first TV spot, which debuted in March during "24," is similarly somber.

"We wanted this film to be different from all of the other movies in the summer," Rothman says. "We wanted people to stop and not have it be so immediately apparent that we're selling a movie. We're interested in selling an emotion and an idea."

Warner Bros. has taken its lumps in the press after laboring for some 13 years through different Superman ideas and reinventions (see timeline). The studio at one point abandoned it altogether after spending almost \$20 million in production and development costs.

Singer's approach was to create a much more traditional story that is a loose continuation of 1978's "Superman: The Movie" and 1981's "Superman II," using parts of John Williams' score and even old footage of Marlon Brando, while at the same time injecting new twists and turns. In the new pic, Superman returns to Earth after a long absence, only to find that Lois Lane has moved on with her life. The big question is whether she or anyone else still needs a superhero.

"The best thing we did was to engage Bryan Singer," says Jeff Robinov, president of production at Warner Bros. "From the second he came on, a lot of the energy — both positive and negative floating around the movie before that — dissipated and shifted. It became about what Bryan was going to do. He had a



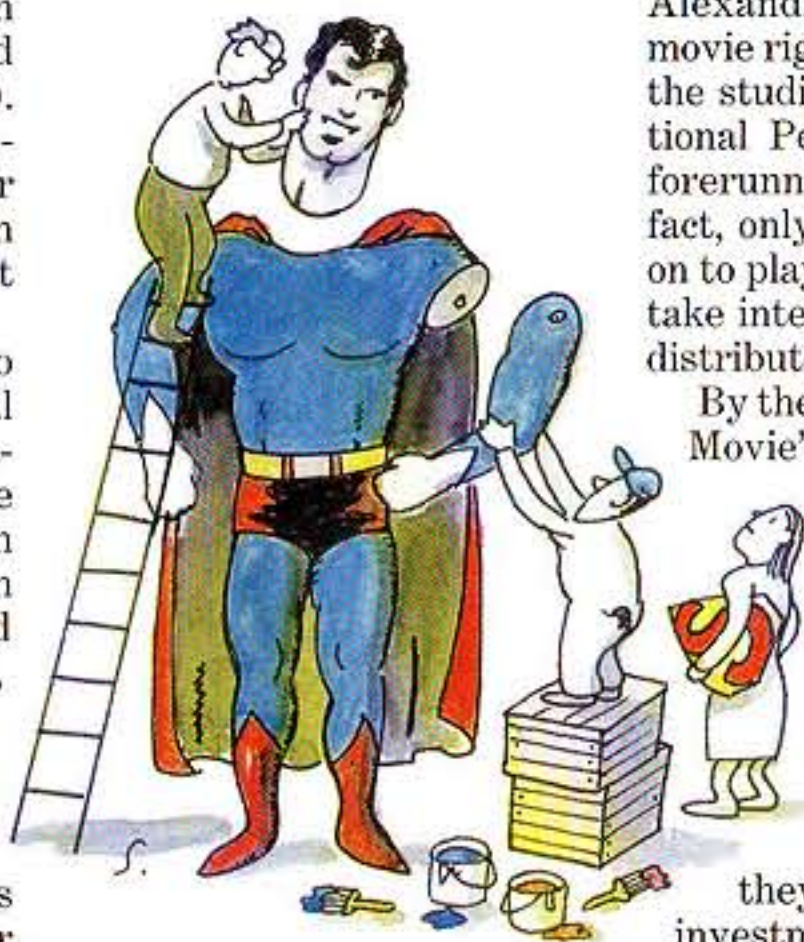
The early ads for "X-Men 3" are intentionally moody and cryptic. Says Fox's Tom Rothman, "We're interested in selling an emotion and an idea."



very specific story in mind, and it is very different from any story we've had before."

There will be subtle deviations from tradition. The slogan "Truth, Justice and the American Way" won't be heard; instead, newspaper editor Perry White says, "Truth, justice, all that stuff." It's a nuance that could help bolster international appeal, at a time when the image of the United States is not exactly at its zenith.

The studio also sees even greater marketability in the character than, for example, Batman, a franchise that was itself revived last year with "Batman Begins." That character's dark persona is harder to translate into toys and promotional partnerships.



"Superman isn't caught up in the same angst that other characters like Spider-Man or Batman are," says Gaetano Mastropasqua, Warners' corporate senior VP of global promotions and partner relations. "Superman stands for truth, justice and a positive way of life."

The studio is undertaking what it calls an unprecedented campaign to promote "Super-

man Returns" with corporate partners that include Pepsi, Perfectmatch.com, Burger King, Duracell and Quaker State Motor Oil. The "S" Superman logo will be on Quaker State's Q Line, used for high-performance cars like Ferraris.

The idea is to get across Superman's "power, strength and durability," Mastropasqua says. Promotional partners for "X-Men 3" have not yet been revealed.

All of this stands in sharp contrast to the way the previous "Superman" feature franchise was launched in the 1970s, when few people took the idea of a big-budget comicbook picture seriously. Back then, Warner Bros. execs were indifferent when producers Ilya and Alexandre Salkind wrangled movie rights to Superman from the studio's sister division National Periodical Publications, forerunner to DC Comics. In fact, only when Brando signed on to play Jor-El did the studio take interest, and only then as distributor.

By the time "Superman: The Movie" was released in 1978, the budget had swelled to \$110 million, and "we owed about \$60 million," Ilya Salkind recalls. Only when two sequels were released in 1981 and 1983, respectively, did they begin to recoup their investment.

The franchise died out after the failure of 1987's "Superman IV: The Quest for Peace," which was farmed out to Golan Globus' Cannon Films. Although distributed and co-produced by Warner Bros., Cannon skimmed on the budget, forgoing elaborate sets of Metropolis for a London industrial park.

After the success of "Batman" in 1989, Warner Bros. reacquired the rights to "Super-

man" from the Salkinds, intent on reviving the franchise, but it struggled with how to reinvent the character as a feature film. Through four different directors (including Tim Burton) and about a dozen screenwriters, different scenarios were broached in which Superman is darker and more neurotic, and one in which Superman battles Batman.

Commercial prospects sometimes ran up against artistic efforts. When Burton was attached to the film, some screenwriters complained of demands to put in such things as spaceships that could be spun off as toys.

And senior execs seemed reluctant to redo Superman as an existentialist hero, which conflicted with what enthusiasts have come to expect from the character. In fact, before they left their posts as studio chairmen, Robert Daly and Terry Semel shelved the project, which was later revived under Barry Meyer and Alan Horn.

In marketing Singer's version, Warner Bros. has paid particular attention to the comicbook's fan base, some of whom were wary of previous incarnations and expressed their opinions on high-trafficked Internet sites. Last summer, in the midst of shooting, the studio flew Singer via private jet from the film's Australian location to San Diego, where he screened footage at the annual Comic-Con comicbook convention. The response was enthusiastic.

"You are never going to satisfy everybody," says producer Michael Euslan ("Batman," "Batman Begins"), who has started a new company called Comic Book Movies with financier M. Jonathan Roberts. "But if you can't satisfy the main part of the fan base, you are going to have problems. These are people who are not only schooled in the characters, the mythology and the history but also in the creators over the years. They know what they like."

Additional reporting by Nicole LaPorte and Pamela McClintock in Los Angeles and Michaela Boland in Sydney.

13 YEARS OF SUPERMAN

1993

WB buys film rights from Salkinds.

1997

January: Burger King pacts as a promotional partner for **Superman Reborn**. Kevin Smith to script. Target bow: Summer 1998.

February: Nicolas Cage signs to star.

April: Tim Burton to direct, Jon Peters to produce.

May: Cage delays **Superman** for **Snake Eyes**.

October: Shooting delayed as Burton rejects Smith's script.

1998

WB shelves **Superman**, unhappy with the script and \$100 million-plus budget.

1999

Bill Wisher to script, but Burton exits.

2001

Wolfgang Petersen to direct **Superman vs. Batman**, aiming for a 2004 bow.

2002

February: McG signs to direct, J.J. Abrams to start a script from scratch.

September: Brett Ratner to direct.

2003

Frustrated with casting, Ratner exits, joins **Rush Hour 3**.

2004

June: Neal Moritz and Gilbert Adler to produce in place of Peters.

July: McG departs for the second time. Bryan Singer steps in, with **X2** scribes Michael Dougherty and Dan Harris writing.

August: Singer exits Fox acrimoniously and sets up his shingle at WB, where he also plans a remake of **Logan's Run**.

November: Cameras roll in Australia, with Brandon Routh starring, Adler and Peters as producers.

2005

WB makes a \$500 million deal with Thomas Tull and Legendary Pictures, which takes a 50% stake in **Superman Returns**.

2006

Superman Returns finally bows on June 30.

Compiled by Anthony D'Alessandro

