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The Year in Revenue

By Steve Pond 12/27/91
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It was a year that began with the biggest-grossing January in motion picture history and ended with a strong December—but in between, there wasn't much good news for Hollywood's movie studios. It was the year Hollywood found out it's not always recession-proof, and as the year ended the signs of that ranged from trivial to serious: Columbia recycled the tent and decorations used a week earlier for a "Hook" premiere party for its own Christmas party; Paramount nixed Christmas bonuses to most staffers, causing quite an outcry; Disney found itself back in the troubling situation it was in for decades, as a company that made money on animated films and reissues, but had more trouble getting anybody to see its new, live-action features; and Orion, the studio that made the year's big Oscar winner, "Dances With Wolves"; the blockbuster that'll be a strong contender at next spring's Oscars, "The Silence of the Lambs"; and one of the hottest current films, "The Addams Family," ended the year in bankruptcy. (Orion, by the way, sold Paramount the rights to "The Addams Family" while that film was in production, so it's no longer an Orion picture.)

The common denominator to most of Hollywood's big 1991 stories, of course, is money. Sure, the town was titillated by producer Julia Phillips's vicious tell-all memoir, "You'll Never Eat Lunch in This Town Again." But it spent more time chortling over Disney chief Jeffrey Katzenberg's "internal" memo detailing the ways to cut costs and make better movies, and how the philosophy outlined in that memo—summarized in a parody memo as "Our underlying philosophy of cheapness lends itself especially well to lean times"—didn't seem to be working anymore.

Yes, Hollywood was fascinated by how many famous people dropped by to see the Culver City sets of Steven Spielberg's "Hook," sets that ironically looked far more detailed and impressive in person than on the screen. But there was more interest in how much "Hook" cost, and in the deal that gave Spielberg, Robin Williams and Dustin Hoffman an unprecedented share of the gross; and in the marketing campaign; and in whether Warren Beatty was upset that TriStar wasn't spending as much on "Bugsy"; and in how the movie opened below expectations, than there was in why Kevin Costner and Sean Connery and Tom Cruise and Robert De Niro and Prince and Queen Noor and a bevy of others dropped by. (Incidentally, they all signed a guest book. Wrote Spielberg's ex-wife, Amy Irving: "I guess I always felt like a visitor." Wrote Elliott

Gould, some time later: "I guess I always felt like Amy Irving.")

It was also a year in which, pound for pound, 10-year-old Macaulay Culkin became the highest-paid actor in history, signing a \$4 million contract for his next movie as "Home Alone" became the third-biggest grossing film ever. A year in which Bruce Willis explained in the Los Angeles Times that movies cost so much because the unions charge too much. A year in which union workers spat on Willis's car and tried to douse him with water from the rafters of the "Hook" set, which he of course visited. It was a year in which Katzenberg learned that Disney had a bad reputation and tried to be nicer to actors and agents and producers to counter that reputation. Some of them bought it, some didn't.

And finally, Hollywood executives will swear that it was a year in which the town learned that big movies don't necessarily mean big bucks, that production costs had gotten out of hand and that smaller, more human movies are a better bet in tough times.

And, oh yeah, 1991 was also a year in which the biggest-grossing film was the most expensive movie made all year, maybe the most expensive Hollywood movie ever. There's the rub: Amid all the talk about cutting costs and scaling things down and coming back to Earth, "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" did none of those things. In the end, that fact may make it awfully hard for Hollywood really to pay attention to those other lessons it claims to have learned.

TOP TEN FILMS

The 10 top-grossing movies for the weekend of Dec. 20-22: (in millions)

| | Est. Wkly. Gross | Est. Total Gross | Weeks on Chart |
|---|------------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1. Hook (TriStar) | \$9.6 | \$30.7 | 2 |
| 2. Father of the Bride (Warner Bros.) | \$7.0 | \$7.0 | 1 |
| 3. The Last Boy Scout (Warner Bros.) | \$5.6 | \$16.3 | 2 |
| 4. Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country (Paramount) | \$5.5 | \$38.3 | 3 |
| 5. JFK (Warner Bros.) | \$5.2 | \$5.2 | 1 |
| 6. Beauty and the Beast (Disney) | \$4.9 | \$46.0 | 6 |
| 7. Bugsy (TriStar) | \$4.6 | \$4.9 | 1½ |
| 8. The Addams Family (Paramount) | \$3.5 | \$78.4 | 5 |
| 9. My Girl (Columbia) | \$2.7 | \$34.8 | 4 |
| 10. Cape Fear (Universal) | \$2.1 | \$53.6 | 6 |

SOURCE: Associated Press