


# Burn HOLLYWOOD Burn

By Michael Baroni



Bob and Harvey Weinstein, founders of Miramax Films, have been reinventing Hollywood. A more apt description might be the title of a recent film—*Burn Hollywood Burn*—in which Harvey cameod as a detective.

The Weinstein boys are known for inexpensive arthouse films that reap huge returns, and for underdog upsets at the Oscars. Their back-to-the-basics recipe for success is in stark contrast to the typical Hollywood practice of huge-budget visual extravaganzas such as *Titanic*. The Weinsteins have thundered through Hollywood like the latest earthquake, and a filmmaking revolution has followed in their wake.

Brothers Bob and Harvey (44 and 47) are two scrappy, burly, working class brothers from Queens, New York. They would just as soon do a deal in a men's room at a film festival or a diner than in an office. They drink cartons of Diet Coke and are described by insiders as blue-collar casual in their dress and eating habits. More importantly, these are the guys responsible for bringing us such offbeat hits as *The Crying Game* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *The English Patient* (1996), *Good Will Hunting* (1997), *Life is Beautiful* (1998), and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). Sometimes they produce the films, sometimes they just scour the film markets around the world and buy the rights for distribution in the U.S.

Those six films combined cost an estimated \$100 million to make; to date they have grossed over \$1.3 billion worldwide. This loot isn't all for the Weinsteins' coffers. Miramax only buys, and profits from, U.S. distribution rights (total U.S. gross on those six: \$370 million and counting). The Weinsteins clearly know how to pick a diamond in the rough—and how to make it shine—like no one else around the world.

Miramax has won best-film Oscars for *The English Patient* and *Shakespeare in Love*, and has racked up over 134 Academy Award nominations and 40 Academy wins in the past ten years. *Life is Beautiful* won for best foreign film, but also received nominations for best film, and best actor—the first time a foreign film has ever been so honored with those two nominations. This would be an astonishing resumé for a major studio, let alone a buck-the-system independent. That has much of old-line Hollywood reeling in envy and frustration. And trying to understand.

"They all want to be me," Harvey has said. "But imitation, while the highest form of flattery,

is also a recipe for disaster." Indeed, upon Miramax's burgeoning success in the early 1990s, Hollywood began to question the logic of their big-time blockbuster budgets. Studios routinely spend about \$60 million a film, with budgets often sailing away up to \$200 million; compare to Miramax's average budget of just \$12 million (about half of a major star's salary).

Hollywood's money problem is compounded when one realizes that a studio must gross at least *twice* its final budget just to break even, since it shares the gross with the theaters. The traditional Hollywood "formula" for success—star actors, spectacular special effects, and a perfect three-act structure wrapped up in a happy ending—is a far riskier game than it used to be.

Green with envy at the Weinsteins' buy-for-nothing, reap-a-fortune antics, studios rushed to try for arthouse-intellectualism themselves, mostly by bringing classic literature to the screen. But too often, the films come up seeming emotionally empty and full of superficial puffery and actors' egos (remember Demi Moore in *The Scarlet Letter*?). The budgets are still too high, but more importantly, the earthy realism and passionate arthouse feel of a true independent ("indie") film is lacking. That's the problem with having teams of executives, agents and A-list stars push and pull to make a movie; it's all business, budgets and power struggles and very little earthy passion. The Weinsteins have stepped into this vacuum and sucked up the hidden gems.

When asked the secret of Miramax's success, Harvey has emphatically stated, "It's the same answer I've been giving for twenty years now—*good writing*. Miramax deals in films where the only special effect is the *script itself*."

## THE SEED OF REVOLUTION

The Weinstein brothers began their entertainment careers producing rock concerts while students at the University of Buffalo in upstate New York. They dropped out, took over a second-run movie theater, and struck arthouse gold by playing *The Secret Policeman's Ball*, a British comedy, as a double-header with its sequel (They bought the rights for \$20,000; the films made \$6 million).

No one in their right minds—if they were strictly going for the money—would have thought to buy and screen such films. The Weinsteins were driven solely by their love for arthouse intellectualism, which they most often found in foreign films.

That same year, 1979, they formed Miramax Films, named after their parents, Miriam and Max (their father was a diamond cutter, ironically symbolic, given the Weinsteins' ability to pick no-name, no-budget films and turn them into hits). They set up offices in midtown Manhattan, then moved to New York's trendier TriBeCa neighborhood, and quickly developed a reputation as distributors of small-budget indie features and foreign films—a niche market ignored by Hollywood players as being laughably small-time and unprofitable.

Hollywood was supposed to be about films that were major events in the making, loaded with stars, explosions, elaborate costumes and set design. True to form, Hollywood was churning out formulaic action-adventures throughout the 1980s. By the 1990s, top-star salaries rose to \$20 million per film, and the risks of such filmmaking became ludicrous; if you hit, you'd be lucky to break even, but if you bombed, you'd lose tens, if not hundreds, of millions.

In contrast, Miramax picked up films made on a shoestring where the only focus was the artistry, like the Italian-made *Cinema Paradiso*. The Weinsteins also turned huge profits on risqué films, each of which cost only a few hundred thousand to make, such as *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, *Swingers*, and *Chasing Amy* (starring a then-unknown Ben Affleck, who falls in love with a lesbian played by Joey Lauren Adams).

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## BAD BOYS

The Weinsteins are known as “angels with claws.” At times they are a filmmaker’s best advocate, yet also such intimidating, table-pounding negotiators that they often manage to buy a film for about the same price the flick was made for.

Screenwriters have also dubbed Harvey with the nickname “Scissorhands” for his tendency to chop apart their films. No one disputes Harvey’s genius ability, however, to take a purely artsy film and cut it into a commercial masterpiece. He knows that for films to do well, there must be a solid story line and character development; Americans, in particular, don’t have the patience for something too nebulous.

The Weinsteins, however, are likewise tenacious advocates in the marketing of their films, when there’s apparently no hook to market on other than a film’s emotionalism and intellectual flavor. They have often been criticized for being too bullish and sensational in their marketing tactics. They also know when to be low-key, however. They originally released *Good Will Hunting*, for example, in only seven big-city theaters, and slowly built to a total of 2,200 as word-of-mouth spread.

Their tough-guys reputation goes beyond their blustery negotiation style—stories like the Weinsteins locking a producer in a hotel room until he agreed to sell his film, or calling reporters a dozen times a day to push their agenda, are legendary. Harvey developed a reputation as the gruff, blustery brother, the company spokesman who sounds off to the press and causes scenes at film festivals. Brother Bob, a complementary opposite in behavior, is more publicly subdued and, in fact, almost never seen. Harvey, it should come as no surprise, is also far heftier physically.

The Weinsteins run Miramax with a hands-on authoritarian grip more akin to the movie moguls of the 1930s than to the modern studio chiefs. The Weinsteins are so filled with the sound and fury of their filmmaking, they have been named among America’s toughest bosses to work for.

## PIT BULLS

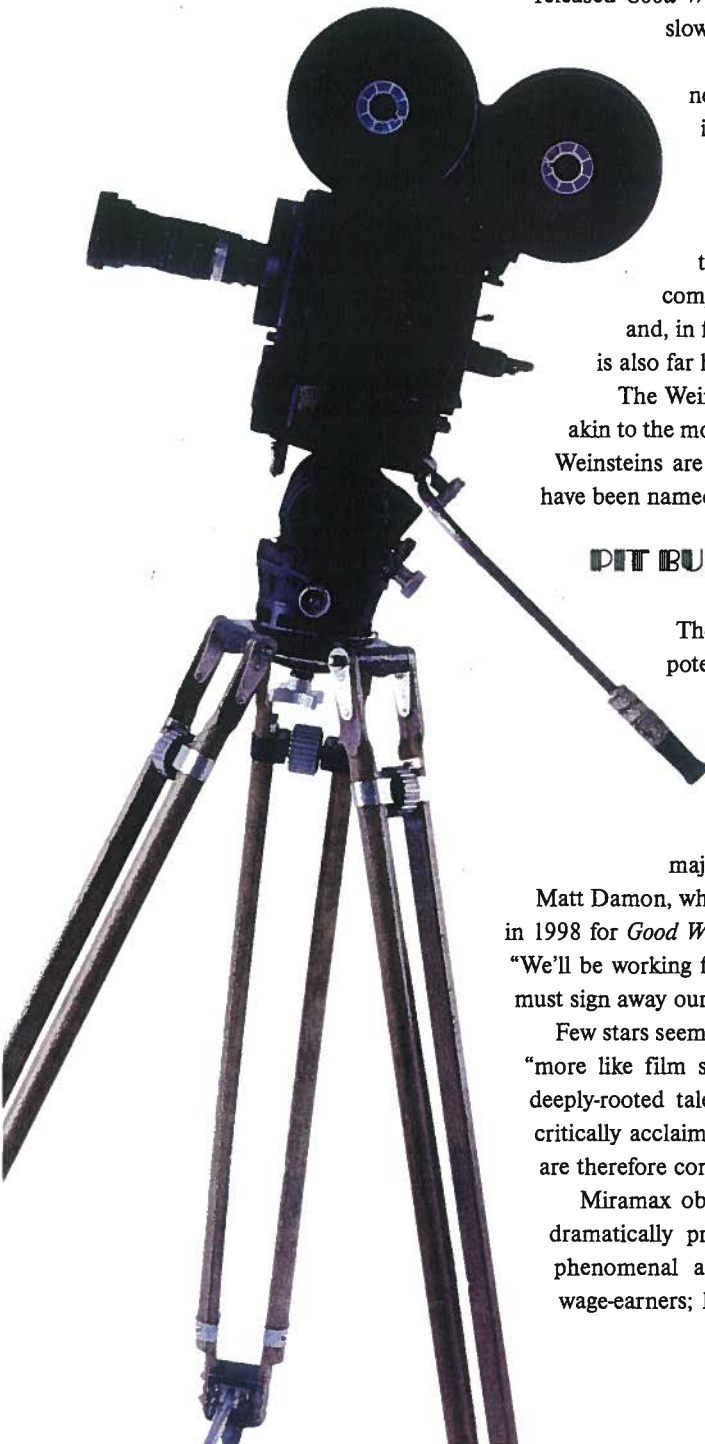
The Weinsteins may be tough to team with, but they also offer the potential for far greater rewards.

Miramax develops fresh filmmaker and acting talent, resurrects dead and buried talent (like Travolta in *Pulp Fiction*, Matt Dillon in *Beautiful Girls*), recasts stars in a powerful new light (Sylvester Stallone as a scathingly sympathetic, big-dumb-heroic cop in *Copland*), and holds major players to multi-picture deals.

Matt Damon, who with co-writer Ben Affleck received a best-screenplay Oscar in 1998 for *Good Will Hunting*, says only half-jokingly of his deal with Miramax, “We’ll be working for Harvey for the next 30 or 40 years. The contract said we must sign away our first three kids.”

Few stars seem to mind being tied to Miramax because they know it’s a place “more like film school” than a typical production house, where their most deeply-rooted talent can be extracted. Actors often do their best and most critically acclaimed work under the supervision of Bob and Harvey, and they are therefore content with earning a fraction of their going rate.

Miramax obtains critical acclaim for actors like none other, which can dramatically propel one’s market value. Samuel Jackson, for all of his phenomenal acting, was never among the leading pack of Hollywood wage-earners; his thunderously powerful performances in *Pulp Fiction* as a





Bible-quoting hit-man, and in *Jackie Brown* as Bridget Fonda's abusive criminal-lover, finally gave him the recognition he deserves.

The Weinsteins fight like rabid pit bulls to get their no-name actors recognition. Billy Bob Thornton's 1996 *Sling Blade* was an unknown film, by an unknown actor/writer/filmmaker. It initially made a paltry \$550,000 in theaters, but Miramax nonetheless managed to get Billy Bob Oscar nominations for best actor and best adapted screenplay. Today, the film's U.S. gross is over \$24 million and Billy Bob is a Hollywood player. Harvey boasted at the time, "Six weeks ago, nobody in America knew Billy Bob Thornton's name; now, everybody does."

Harvey was also the catalyst for Gwyneth Paltrow's star. He cast her in *Emma* (1996) and was reportedly irate when Gwyneth failed to win an Academy nomination. Harvey cast her in *Shakespeare in Love*, and launched an avalanche of marketing for the film and Gwyneth. Gwyneth got her Oscar, and *Shakespeare in Love* won for best film.

## OSCAR IN LOVE & WAR

*Shakespeare in Love*'s win over Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* evoked audible gasps of disbelief from Hollywood's old-line elite. There were immediate accusations that Miramax had bought itself an Oscar through crass multi-million dollar advertising and direct phone calls to Academy members (Miramax denies this). Some said Miramax used "strong-arm tactics," "shanghaied" the Oscar, and turned the Academy Awards into a "political campaign."

One producer says, "If you can buy yourself an Oscar, what's the point? There's no artistic value attached anymore. It's disgusting."

Others, however, say that *Shakespeare*'s win simply reflects the fact that young actors make up the majority of Academy members, so it's no surprise that *Shakespeare*—a movie about acting—would beat out a war film. *Love over War*. Harvey implies the controversy is simply cooked up by competitors who are green with envy and frustration, trying to pick away at Miramax any way they can. It is true that Miramax ran fewer trade ads than some studios did, and spent no more on the *Shakespeare* Oscar campaign than it has in prior years on other films.

## PASSION OVER LOGIC

The Weinsteins credit their success to one item they see missing in a lot of Hollywood decisions: pure passion for the basic art and beauty of film. The Weinsteins only produce or distribute films they deeply love. They never make choices based on traditional financial logic.

Regarding the Brit film *Brassed Off*, for instance, Harvey said, "I love this movie. It has not received the best reviews, but I am going to fight for this movie like I fought for *Sling Blade*, and so is this company, because we believe in it. I don't care if the snotty critics in New York like it or don't like it. If nobody else is going to fight for movies like this, then we are."

Harvey recounts the screening of a Japanese film, *Shall We Dance*, at the Cannes film festival. "I watched Fine Line, October, all of them go into the movie and walk out. They passed," presumably because it lacked the typical commercial elements needed for success in America. Miramax



PHOTO BY PATRICK MCMULLAN

*Bob (left) and Harvey (right) Weinstein*

acquired the film for a paltry \$300,000; the film garnered critical praise and grossed \$10 million. Then the others complained that Miramax unfairly buys up all the good product before they have a chance.

"There's plenty of room for other companies," says Harvey. "But they've got to stop throwing slings and arrows at Miramax and look to themselves and ask why they aren't doing a better job."

## RISK TAKERS

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The Weinsteins, like true indie filmmakers, take and encourage creative risk. They will buy and distribute such starless, unconventional films as *Princess Mononoke* (a Japanese animated film), and *Children of Heaven* (an Iranian family living in poverty finds hope).

Regarding the thrill of the gamble, Harvey says, "I'm so thrilled that after all the success of *The English Patient* (estimated cost \$40 million, by far their most expensive film), the very next hit we had was *Chasing Amy*, made for \$250,000. To me, that's Miramax. The biggest gamble of our lives turns out to be correct, and then the smallest risk we've ever taken turns out to be a hit."

Hollywood studios function just the opposite. If one pushes a small film without A-list talent, and it does well—you're a hero. But if it *doesn't* do well—"Your head will roll," says one producer. Risk is poison to a Hollywood executive. That's why we see the same stories and stars repeated year after year.

## MIRAMAX'S CULTURAL INFLUENCE

The Weinsteins have dramatically shifted American filmgoing habits, particularly in urban centers where the intellectual set thrives on being cultured. Before, people were mostly concerned with not missing the latest blockbuster. Now, Miramax is so synonymous with intellectual, artsy filmmaking, many people feel downright ignorant if they haven't seen the latest Miramax hit. That is the greatest marketing ploy a film distributor/producer could ever have; *see our film or you're stupid*.

Once a Miramax film is nominated for an Oscar, for example, box office receipts skyrocket. That was the case with *Good Will Hunting*, *The English Patient*, *Life is Beautiful*, and *Shakespeare in Love* (which also had that pretentious Shakespeare-thing going for it). Films like *The Piano* and *Trainspotting* caught a similar high-brow intellectual wave and rode it all the way to the bank.

## SEX, BLOOD, AND . . . DISNEY?

In 1993, The Walt Disney Company acquired Miramax for a mere \$60 million. Some viewed this pairing as a ludicrous attraction of opposites; others praised the squeaky-clean Disney's foresight and courage in jumping into bed with the arthouse blood, sex and gritty emotionalism that Miramax was pushing.

Like a slot machine on its first yank, the gamble had instant payoff. *Pulp Fiction* opened a year later to critical praise and was Miramax's biggest money-maker to date, grossing \$213 million. It also resurrected John Travolta's career. It's a horrifyingly bloody film which includes graphic man-on-man rape scenes, S&M torture and brains being splattered across the back seat of a car.

The Disney-Miramax pairing only works because Disney has retained a "hands off" approach while letting Miramax use Disney's resources. Except for the fact that Disney (under their agreement) will not allow Miramax to release films above an "R" rating, the Weinsteins are fully entrenched at the reins. For one shockingly controversial film, *Kids* (which initially received an X-rating), Miramax skirted around the issue by setting up a dummy-company to distribute the film.

Harvey has joked, "Michael Eisner (Chairman/CEO of Disney) can't make me do anything. Besides, he likes having a black sheep in the family."

## FAT CATS

With their exponential success, the Weinsteins have embarked on new ventures, and are now more of an entertainment conglomerate than a true indie.

Dimension films, a Miramax division run by brother Bob, has been a major part of the Weinsteins' success. It has turned out thriller/horror flicks like the massively successful *Scream* (over \$200 million gross each on *Scream* 1 and 2, with 3 on the way). Dimension has also struck a first-look deal with Loud Films, a division of Loud Records, known for its hard-core rap music.

In print, Miramax recently launched the hugely hyped *Talk* magazine helmed by former *New Yorker* editor Tina Brown. The goal for *Talk* is to create a generalist, intellectual magazine that will cross-pollinate articles, books, films and television shows.

Miramax has also announced a deal with MGM to re-develop MGM's library of classic films (such as *Gone with the Wind*), and has partnered with All American (distributors of *Baywatch*) to produce TV game shows.

The Weinsteins are rumored to be buying a \$50 million dollar building to relocate their expanding operations.

Miramax has also been distancing itself from the kind of starless, struggling-filmmaker kind of movie they became famous for. Their later films are loaded with Hollywood stars, like *54* (Salma Hayek, Mike Meyers), *The Mighty* (Sharon Stone), *Outside Providence* (Alec Baldwin), and *Rounders* (Matt Damon, Ed Norton).

The primary question for Miramax is whether or not it can retain its independent flavor in the midst of all this diversification and swelling growth.

## FINAL CUT

The Weinsteins have greatly enriched American movie culture and forced studios to push toward greater story substance and character development. This, in turn, has helped to spur a tremendous interest in film festivals. Indie filmmakers have a better chance than ever of being catapulted from nowhere into the big time.

In an age where making movies is just as much about merchandising, video game crossovers, soundtrack CDs and DVDs, it is reassuring to have the gruff and gritty Weinstein boys as growling advocates for arthouse filmmaking.

"It's all about celebrating cinema," says Harvey. "That's it. That's the bottom line." So long as the Weinsteins retain their pure passion for the beauty of film, and don't drown in their own tsunami success, we will all continue to be the richer for it.

If that means that some of the current Hollywood system has to make way, then *Burn Hollywood Burn*. □

