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COLLECTIVE

ISSUE 9

SYRIA

A MEDIA REVOLUTION

FINDING IT

ALEXA CHUNG

THE MAKING OF **WALT DISNEY +**

KRISTEN BELL

KICKSTARTING THE

FILM INDUSTRY

WOMEN IN TECH: THE SHIFT

FASHION / DESIGN / FILM / FOOD / TECH / ART / SOCIAL CHANGE / TRAVEL



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the making of ALT DISNEY

DESPITE *bankruptcy, incorrigible sceptics, negativity and sheer BAD LUCK*, *Walt Disney* SUCCEEDED *way beyond his wildest DREAMS* to become *the man to TRANSFORM HOLLYWOOD and our childhoods*.

WORDS: DILVIN YASA

Many of us at some point in our lives have come face-to-face with The Great Crusher of Dreams. TGCD might be a friend, bank manager or just that internal voice that tells you to quit chasing a dream that has too great a risk of failure, or little financial gain. If you've been in that situation, take a moment to consider Walt Disney, the American business magnate who revealed his own battle against TGCD as he worked to build his empire.

"I could never convince the financiers that Disneyland was feasible, because dreams offer too little collateral," said Walt, a strong-willed character whose perseverance was recently immortalised in the film *Saving Mr. Banks* (which chronicled his 20-year long struggle to produce *Mary Poppins*).

He was also able to prove the financiers wrong, unless you count assets including 11 theme parks, eight motion picture studios, 22 Academy Awards, 39 hotels, eight record labels and an annual revenue of US\$45 billion as 'little collateral'. This was Walt, the man who had a dream. >



Born in 1901 to an average Irish-Canadian family in Chicago, much is made of the term 'self-made' when it comes to describing Walt, but it's a term he detested.

"It seems to me shallow and arrogant for any man in these times to claim he is completely self-made, that he owes all his successes to his own unaided efforts... many hands and hearts and minds generally contribute to anyone's notable achievements."

Rather, he claimed, he worked hard, was in the right place at the right time and he ensured he always surrounded himself with talented people who worked just as hard.

One such person was the cartoonist Ub Iwerks whom he met when he took up a position in an art studio creating advertisements for newspapers, magazines and movie theatres.

Walt had worked as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross during World War I and as a newspaper artist (although he claimed nobody wanted to hire him), but it wasn't until his partnership with Ub that his creative flame was ignited. With Ub by his side as business partner, what could go wrong? Plenty, it would seem.

Their first venture – a company called Iwerks-Disney Commercial Artists – was short-lived but influential on their future direction. While working on a commercial based on cut-out images, Walt became obsessed with animation and opened his own animation business, securing a deal with a popular theatre owner to screen their self-made cartoons they called 'Laugh-O-Grams'. The screenings were successful and buoyed by the public response, Walt acquired his own studio but soon realised that it wasn't meant to be.

The studio became bogged down in debt and eventually went bankrupt. Walt closed up shop and did what anyone else facing a bankrupt future does – dream bigger and move to Hollywood to put those dreams into action.

"Somehow I can't believe there are any heights that can't be scaled by a man who knows the secret of making dreams come true," he said.



PEOPLE OFTEN ASK *me if I know the SECRET OF SUCCESS and if I could tell others HOW to make their DREAMS COME TRUE. My ANSWER is, you do it by WORKING.*

"This special secret, it seems to me, can be summarised in four C's. They are curiosity, confidence, courage and constancy and the greatest of these is confidence. When you believe a thing, believe it all the way, implicitly and unquestionably."

His beliefs were put to the test almost immediately. Although he had some luck, marrying his employee Lillian Bounds, a lucrative deal featuring his new popular *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* series went awry in 1928 after he attempted to negotiate a higher fee per shot.

Not only was his request declined, Walt was informed he would have to accept a reduction in fees or have all of his animators taken from him (all under contract to producer Charles Mintz at the time) to start another animation studio directly in competition with him.

Walt refused and as a result, lost all of his staff with the exception of Ub who reportedly remained loyal. Tough break? Absolutely. But had it not happened, Mickey Mouse may well never have existed.

They say necessity is the mother of all invention and without Oswald, then Walt's bread and butter, he desperately needed a new figure to replace him, a figure that the public would adore. Enter Mickey Mouse in 1928, a character that soon brought Walt untold success – and riches – from which he could build.

"Born of necessity, the little fellow [Mickey Mouse] literally freed us of immediate worry," he said at the time.



"He provided the means for expanding our organisation to its present dimensions and for extending the medium cartoon animation towards new entertainment levels. He spelled production liberation for us."

In other words, Mickey was the ultimate middle-fingered salute to the industry that had robbed him blind. And the best part? He was only just getting started.

Various projects followed, some successful, others not so, but it was his idea to release an animated movie-length version of *Snow White* (unheard of in the early 1930s) that had critics mumbling that Walt had finally gone mad.

But Walt, confident that this was the future of motion pictures, dismissed what he perceived to be idle gossip and forged ahead regardless, not unusual from the man who often declared, "We are not trying to entertain the critics. I'll take my chances with the public."

Production dragged on for three long years but when it was released in 1938, it became the most successful motion picture of the year and earned more than US\$8 million on its initial release – considered some US\$132 million in today's money. Buoyed by this success, other titles such as *Pinocchio*, *Peter Pan*, *Bambi* and *Alice in Wonderland* came to be and parents and children worldwide were enthralled by Walt's world of fantasy.

When asked about his ability to tap into the psyche of children, Walt offered only this: "I do not make films primarily for children. I make them for the child in all of us, whether he be six or 60."

Whatever it was, it clearly worked. Throughout the '50s and early '60s, Walt never stopped dreaming and creating, first building a theme park, Disneyland – initially conceived as a spot he imagined his employers could go to spend

ALL you've got to do is OWN up to your IGNORANCE HONESTLY, and you'll find people who are EAGER to fill your head with information.

quality time with their children – and expanding into live-action features such as *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *The Parent Trap* and of course, *Mary Poppins*.

For a while it seemed everything he touched turned to gold, something Walt himself couldn't quite comprehend.

"We grew to our present size almost against ourselves. It was not a deliberately planned commercial venture in the sense that I sat down and said that we were going to make ourselves into a huge financial octopus. We evolved by necessity. We did not sit down and say to ourselves, 'How can we make a big pile of dough?' It just happened."

And when it seemed the magic would go on forever, his years of chain smoking finally caught up with him. (Despite Walt rarely being seen without a cigarette in hand, his character in *Saving Mr. Banks* is never seen indulging in the habit due to The Walt Disney Company's recent efforts to ban the portrayal of smoking in their films. In fact, this was the only change the company had to the entire movie script).

Dying of complications from lung cancer in 1966, Walt left half of his vast fortune to his wife and two daughters and the other half to a charitable foundation for the arts. Though he was gone, he wanted the magic to continue and if we take a look at that 'collateral', surely we can say it most definitely has. ■

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