

[disney in decline]

## *How the Mouse Lost His Magic*

Ousting Eisner won't be enough to right troubled Disney if it doesn't rediscover the wonder of childhood.

**By Peter Eavis**

IN THE MIDST of its recent troubles the Walt Disney Company did something that revealed the desperation of its senior management team, dominated for 20 years by chief executive Michael Eisner.

On the eve of the critical March 3 shareholder vote on Eisner's leadership, Disney placed full-page ads in several high-circulation newspapers to announce its participation in a new movie. Disney rarely, if ever, announces movie plans in quite such an ostentatious and expensive fashion. But the sudden burst of publicity was especially odd because the movie is not scheduled for release until Christmas 2005.

What was the film that Disney executives were so keen to give the country such early notice of? A live-action version of C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, to be produced in cooperation with Walden Media. And why the bizarre ad blitz? One can only assume that Disney wanted to give its critics the impression that it is still in the game of producing the sort of magical, blockbuster kids' movies that made the company a much-loved institution in the first place. Disney hasn't made an exceptional

children's movie in over ten years, and no film made under Eisner's reign has come close to the cinematic greatness of "Pinocchio" or "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," which Sergei Eisenstein called the best ever movie made.

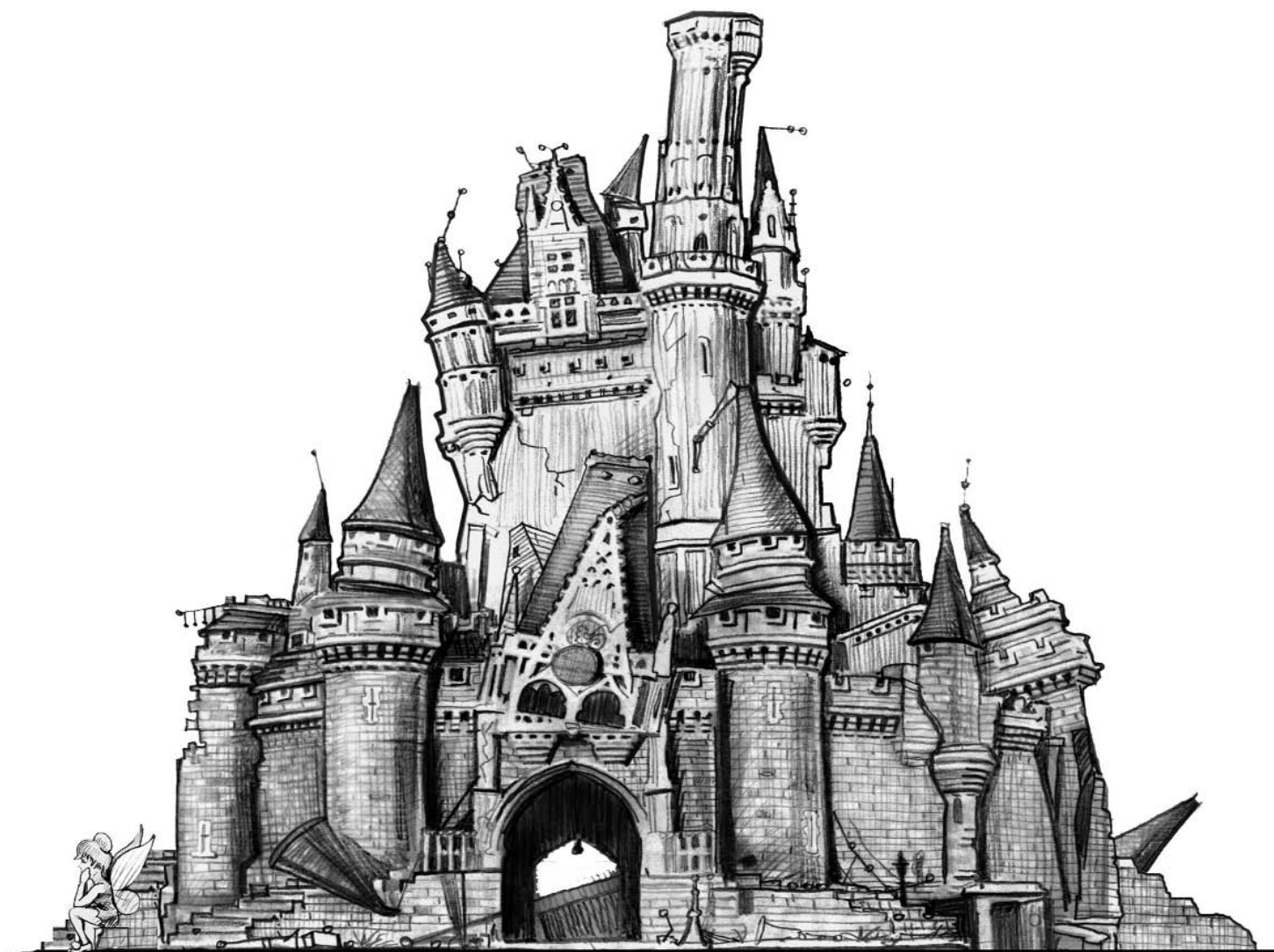
The dearth of great kids' movies coming out of Disney is the starkest indication that the House of Mouse has lost its magic. In his first years at the top, Eisner revived Disney's economic fortunes, but he has also overseen a dramatic aesthetic and moral decline. In 1928, an unknown Midwesterner called Walter Disney burst onto the scene with a cartoon called "Steamboat Willie." From then until his death in 1966, Walt's company became a dream factory capable of capturing American imaginations for generation after generation. Walt, fiercely independent from the start, never wanted his company to become just another Hollywood studio. He grasped that being part of Tinseltown required aesthetic and moral compromises he wasn't willing to make.

Under Eisner, the consummate Hollywood insider, Disney has made those compromises and become just another global entertainment conglomerate,

pumping out a frighteningly prodigious slew of low-grade movies, music, and television, often dedicated to a ferociously progressive agenda. Because of Eisner, Disney is now right up there with trash factories like Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. and Viacom, which produced and aired Janet Jackson's Super Bowl breastcapade.

Indeed, the Eisner years at Disney represent the Left's biggest victory in the culture war. Progressives always had the pre-Eisner Walt Disney in their sights. They looked down on Walt-era movies for their uncompromising wholesomeness, and Walt himself will always be a villain to the Left because of his collaboration with Hoover's FBI and his support for the House Un-American Activities Committee. Of course, progressives now despise Disney, the profits-hungry corporation, but they celebrate the company's embrace of their beliefs. The boldest example of this is Disney's tacit support for the annual Gay Days that take place at its Orlando and Anaheim theme parks.

Under Eisner, Disney has come to produce some of the darkest offerings in modern culture and, most despicably, it



CHRIS HIRS

uses kids' movies to forward its hypersexualized worldview. Disney defenders claim this is just conservative hysteria, but movies currently in theaters show this to be the case. Take "Kill Bill Vol. 2," a slick paean to vengeful murder produced by Disney's feted Miramax label. In one scene, the heroine claws out the eyeball of an already one-eyed rival female assassin and coolly squishes the organ with her bare foot.

"Home on the Range," Disney's most recent animated feature, contains enough innuendo to make Howard Stern blush. In one scene, a group of cows are teasing a male horse character for being smitten with his human master, a brooding bounty hunter. One of the heifers,

played by Roseanne Barr, taunts the horse: "Do you get to ride him on odd days or even?" This from the studio that brought us "Bambi."

It is somewhat gratifying, then, to witness the assault on Disney's leadership. There is a real chance that Eisner, who has received compensation totaling around \$1 billion since joining the company, could be gone within the next couple of years. Walt's nephew, Roy Disney, and investor Stanley Gold are leading a very well organized shareholders' revolt to unseat the chief exec. Earlier this year, Eisner had to fend off an unsolicited \$50 billion takeover bid by cable giant Comcast. Though Comcast withdrew its bid in late April

because it didn't want to increase its offer price, Disney remains exposed to corporate predators.

Comcast was emboldened to pounce because of the unpopularity of Eisner, who is seen on Wall Street as an increasingly out-of-touch corporate Castro. Disney is also vulnerable to predators because of the continuing poor ratings performance of the Disney-owned ABC television network and the widespread feeling that the company just cannot cut it in what was once its core business: making sensational kids' movies.

In mustering his defense, Eisner has not been able to point to good financial results for several years now. In 2003, Disney's per-share earnings were no

higher than they were seven years ago. Its stock is 40 percent below its all-time high, reached four years ago. Disney shareholders have much in Eisner's long tenure to get upset about. For example, in 1996 Disney paid super-agent Michael Ovitz a severance package estimated at \$140 million—just a year after Eisner had wooed him to the company. The payout is now the subject of shareholder litigation against Disney.

In this environment, it has been easy for Roy Disney and Gold to whip up support for their cause. Their biggest victory so far came at Disney's annual meeting in early March, when 43 percent of shareholders withheld their votes to re-elect Eisner to the board.

Disney's directors' sole concession to the critics was to unseat Eisner as chairman, leaving him in the CEO post where he will likely undermine any reforms attempted by Disney's new chairman, former Sen. George Mitchell. Outside the company walls, Roy Disney and Gold are showing few signs of letting up in their campaign. Their feud has enough personal bitterness to sustain it for years. Disney hissed in his Nov. 30 resignation letter to Eisner: "Michael, it is my sincere belief that it is you who should be leaving and not me." And Roy's latest coup was to obtain data

CEO Brian Roberts, known for his patience and long-term perspective, will re-launch his bid if Disney slips badly. And with Eisner in the top post, it may not be long before Disney reports disappointing numbers and becomes quickly defenseless against another takeover attempt. Disney supporters currently think a reviving economy will bail Disney out with higher theme-park revenues, but unexpectedly expensive movie flops like "The Alamo" could undermine Disney's efforts to achieve its aggressive earnings forecasts for this year. Another year at the bottom of the network rankings for ABC could be enough to force Disney into a predator's arms.

So is a Disney revival just a matter of toppling Eisner? Sadly, no. Though possessing Disney blood, nephew Roy is not going to bring about the much-needed artistic renaissance. He certainly talks the talk, writing in a February letter to Disney's shareholders: "Comcast's offer to purchase Disney is confirmation that we are not alone in our belief that Disney can be reinvigorated by embracing its rich creative heritage. Creativity must be the core of the company."

But while Roy now loathes Eisner, he may still have too much admiration for the vulgarization process that the CEO unleashed. In the May issue of *Vanity*

that is at stark variance with the ethos and spirit of the old Walt Disney that America fell in love with 70 years ago—and never really stopped loving. To reclaim that old magic, there has to be a complete jettisoning of this contemporary approach to children's movies. And that is unlikely to happen under Roy Disney or a company like Comcast.

Disney will only be a lasting force in the entertainment industry, however, if it returns to its roots and stops trying to mimic the dross put out by other media conglomerates. Not just shareholders would benefit from such a shift. We would all benefit from having a large studio in existence that believes cinematic greatness can be achieved in a children's movie.

Walt Disney himself believed this combination was possible, and it shows in the classics that were made under him. But to make timeless kids' movies, a studio has to do one important thing: believe in childhood. And in the past 20 years, every major studio, including Disney, has stopped doing just that.

Instead, Hollywood seems to think childhood is only made complete if it includes much from the adult world. As a result, kids' movies contain increasing amounts of worldliness, campiness, and sexuality. Disney has joined the rest of the entertainment industry, and possibly a good part of society, in believing that children are merely under-formed adults for whom a movie like "Dumbo" is, well, just too dumb.

However, childhood is supposed to happen, even if the media elites do not want it to. It is a Dickensian cliché that children were robbed of childhood by having to go to work at too early an age. Today, a real shrinkage of childhood is taking place because of other factors. One is the general moral decline of society. Think of Britney Spears, adored by pre-teens, French-kissing Madonna. Another is the materialism that leads

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showing deep anti-Eisner sentiment among current and former Disney employees. A stunning 72 percent of shares cast by the company's retirement plan were withheld in the vote to reappoint Eisner as CEO.

Meanwhile, expect Comcast and other rivals to keep stalking Disney in the shadows. It's quite possible that Comcast's

*Fair*, Michael Wolff writes that Roy admitted with "some grudging admiration and embarrassment" that Eisner made it possible "to show bare breasts at Disney."

Indeed, Roy was head of animation at Disney from 1985 till his resignation last year, a period when the company embraced a trend in children's movies





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both parents to work, even if they have young children. And then there are the entertainment companies like Disney that celebrate, and hope to profit from, the “adultification” of kids.

The films that attempt to embrace this early-maturation trend are typically weak. Disney and rivals like Dream-Works and Pixar are all striving to make their features “edgier.” What audiences get, though, are mutant movies that fall between two stools because they are not funny to adults and they fail to spark wonderment in children.

Age compression, to use the industry jargon, can simply be irritating. But sometimes edginess can undermine an entire movie. In Disney’s “Lilo & Stitch” animated feature, the idea of what childhood constitutes is so confused that it is actually impossible to estimate an age for Lilo, the young Hawaiian girl who is the main (human) character in the movie. She looks like she’s four and sometimes acts like it, but her behavior more resembles that of an emotionally traumatized 14-year-old. “Leave me alone to die,” Lilo tells her adult older

sister, and effectively her sole parent, in one scene.

Yes, Pinocchio had his moments of despair, but as he learned the ways of the world he remained a child. Indeed, he became one. By contrast, Lilo is never really a child, but an adolescent with toddlerish tendencies. The old Disney clearly believed that childhood is a place where there should be room to discover oneself and start to grapple with the big themes of life, like good and evil. The new Disney dodges, down-plays, or flubs such ideas.

One recent Disney production that attempted to play it straight was “Treasure Planet,” an expensive animated feature that flopped last year. The movie is surprisingly free from the usual annoying attempts at edginess and the storyline is centered on redemption. So why did “Treasure Planet” fail commercially? A lack of edginess? No, the movie was aesthetically dead. The characters were clichés and the animation mediocre. It felt like Disney’s heart just was not in a project that did not contain all the fashionable adult influences.

“Treasure Planet” did badly in the same year that “Finding Nemo,” laced with smart-alecky adult humor, was far more successful at the box office. “Nemo,” made by Pixar but distributed by Disney, took in \$844 million around the world, making it the ninth-highest grossing movie of all time and the second-biggest kids’ movie. Industry experts therefore hail Pixar, which has now spilt with Disney, as the future of children’s entertainment.

The Pixar bubble could soon pop, however. It is too big a believer in age compression ever to make great movies. Also, one can already see signs of self-parody in its work. Moreover, a classic Disney movie could blow anything from Pixar out of the water. Box-office comparisons between movies released decades apart are notoriously difficult. Even so, the massive gap between the grosses for Disney’s classics and recent releases is big enough to provide ample margin for judgment. For example, on an inflation-adjusted basis using U.S.-only box-office receipts, “Snow White” raked in \$675 million, the tenth largest

inflation-adjusted gross. By contrast, “Nemo” grossed \$340 million in the U.S., placing it a lowly 59th overall.

To be fair, Eisner made real efforts in the early '90s to make great animated features. But even these contained some of the flaws that would later cripple the company's creativity. In “The Lion King,” which is the best thing produced under Eisner, meaty themes like death, guilt, and fear are successfully explored. And it had a raw power not seen in Disney movies before. The signs of the future rot are clearly apparent, though. The makers felt compelled to have the lions believe in a half-baked Earth religion called the Circle of Life. And adult humor was creeping in. In one scene, the innocent cub Simba asks the evil,

were two stark examples of this trough. First, a brutally graphic Miramax movie called “Kids,” which was about a young skateboarder who sets out to deflower as many virgins as possible. In fact, almost the entire output of Miramax represents an interesting study in post-Christian morality. Early on in “Kill Bill Vol. 1,” the quintessential Miramax movie because of its low-brow irony and adolescent desire to shock, the heroine breathlessly announces: “It's mercy, compassion, and forgiveness I lack, not rationality.” What better motto for modern America?

The other epoch-making stinker from Disney in the mid-'90s was “Pocahontas,” without doubt the worst big-budget animated feature ever made. Maybe

The plot is full of holes. Pocahontas learns to speak English fluently in 20 seconds after meeting the Englishman with whom she eventually falls in love. In real life, Pocahontas converted to Christianity. Somewhat understandably, Disney chooses to not include that, but it does not feel embarrassed about having Pocahontas's British beau chat with her friendly tree-spirit. Eisner said in his autobiography that he had doubts about Pocahontas when it was being made. But he let it come out in the form it did.

It is almost impossible to imagine that the Disney that made “Pocahontas” and “Lilo & Stitch” could create something great out of Narnia. But the success of “The Passion” may even convince Disney and partner Walden Media to bring out the rich Christian undertones of Lewis's work. After all, Walden is controlled by Christian billionaire Philip Anschutz.

And there is one very strong contemporary indication that children still want magical children's fare like Narnia: the off-the-charts success of the Harry Potter books, which are mercifully devoid of edginess and create a world apart from everyday adults. In fact, the 2001 movie “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone” is the biggest-grossing children's film of all time, taking in \$976 million globally.

That of course bodes well for “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,” in which adults hardly feature. But Disney could still screw it up. Indeed, failure to make something great out of something as ripe as Narnia would be the clearest sign yet of Disney's creative bankruptcy. To guard against such an eventuality, the board needs to pressure Eisner out now. His departure would be one of the happiest endings in the history of the Magic Kingdom. ■

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## THE TRIBE LIVES IN AN **AGRARIAN UTOPIA**. POCAHONTAS IS DRAWN TO LOOK EXACTLY LIKE A **BAYWATCH BABE**.

decadent usurper lion, Scar, “Why are you so weird?” Scar, in his ever-so-camp drawl, supplied by Jeremy Irons, replies suggestively, “You have no idea.”

It was in 1994, the year “The Lion King” was released, that things started to go wrong for Disney on so many fronts. The company's president, Frank Wells, died in a helicopter crash. Wells had joined Disney alongside Eisner and kept him in check. One Disney veteran even described Wells as Eisner's Jiminy Cricket—his conscience. In his autobiography, Eisner says Wells was “a source of quiet moral authority to whom I could turn whenever I was tempted to push the boundaries just a little too far.”

And Eisner soon started behaving as if there were no boundaries whatsoever. In 1995, Disney overpaid for the ABC network. Eisner's lack of boundaries pushed Disney to an artistic nadir. There

because it was conceived against the backdrop of the first O.J. trial and the racial tension that event engendered, Pocahontas became a bizarre piece of politically-correct agitprop.

As soon as the Englishmen traveling to the New World are introduced, we learn that they are intent on slaughtering the Indians. “Not a thousand bloodthirsty savages shall stand in our way,” Disney has one Englishman say. The portrayal of the Indians is also stereotypical. Though the tribe we encounter has just finished a war with another tribe, it lives in an agrarian Utopia. Pocahontas is drawn to look exactly like a Baywatch Babe. It is therefore very odd to see her prancing about over the countryside belting out the PC anthem that includes the line that captured the wretched zeitgeist of the mid-'90s: “Can you paint with all the colors of the wind?”

[lost tribe]

# Forgotten Christians

Not all displaced Palestinians are Muslims.

By Anders Strindberg

MEL GIBSON'S "The Passion of the Christ" is playing to full houses in the Syrian capital Damascus. Watching it here turns out to be much the same as watching it on opening night in New York—customarily rowdy moviegoers observe a reverent silence, the usual sound of candy wrappers is replaced by sobbing and gasping, and, at the end of it all, the audience files out of the theater in silence and contemplation.

Many of those watching the movie on this occasion are Palestinian Christian refugees whose parents or grandparents were purged from their homeland—the land of Christ—at the foundation of Israel in 1948. For them the movie has an underlying symbolic meaning not easily perceived in the West: not only is it a depiction of the trial, scourging, and death of Jesus, it is also a symbolic depiction of the fate of the Palestinian people. "This is how we feel," says Zaki, a 27-year old Palestinian Christian whose family hails from Haifa. "We take beating after beating at the hands of the world, they crucify our people, they insult us, but we refuse to surrender."

At the time of the creation of the Israeli state in 1948, it is estimated that the Christians of Palestine numbered some 350,000. Almost 20 percent of the total population at the time, they constituted a vibrant and ancient community; their forbears had listened to St. Peter in Jerusalem as he preached at the first

Pentecost. Yet Zionist doctrine held that Palestine was "a land without a people for a people without a land." Of the 750,000 Palestinians that were forced from their homes in 1948, some 50,000 were Christians—7 percent of the total number of refugees and 35 percent of the total number of Christians living in Palestine at the time.

In the process of "Judaizing" Palestine, numerous convents, hospices, seminaries, and churches were either destroyed or cleared of their Christian owners and custodians. In one of the most spectacular attacks on a Christian target, on May 17, 1948, the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate was shelled with about 100 mortar rounds—launched by Zionist forces from the already occupied monastery of the Benedictine Fathers on Mount Zion. The bombardment also damaged St. Jacob's Convent, the Archangel's Convent, and their appended churches, their two elementary and seminary schools, as well as their libraries, killing eight people and wounding 120.

Today it is believed that the number of Christians in Israel and occupied Palestine number some 175,000, just over 2 percent of the entire population, but the numbers are rapidly dwindling due to mass emigration. Of those who have remained in the region, most live in Lebanon, where they share in the same bottomless misery as all other refugees, confined to camps where schools are

under-funded and overcrowded, where housing is ramshackle, and sanitary conditions are appalling. Most, however, have fled the region altogether. No reliable figures are available, but it is estimated that between 100,000 and 300,000 Palestinian Christians currently live in the U.S.

The Palestinian Christians see themselves, and are seen by their Muslim compatriots, as an integral part of the Palestinian people, and they have long been a vital part of the Palestinian struggle. As the Anglican bishop of Jerusalem, the Reverend Riah Abu al-Assal has explained, "The Arab Palestinian Christians are part and parcel of the Arab Palestinian nation. We have the same history, the same culture, the same habits and the same hopes."

Yet U.S. media and politicians have become accustomed to thinking of and talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as one in which an enlightened democracy is constantly forced to repel attacks from crazy-eyed Islamists bent on the destruction of the Jewish people and the imposition of an Islamic state. Palestinians are equated with Islamists, Islamists with terrorists. It is presumably because all organized Christian activity among Palestinians is non-political and non-violent that the community hardly ever hits the Western headlines; suicide bombers sell more copy than people who congregate for Bible study.