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With Fan at the Helm, Marvel Safely Steers Its Heroes to the Screen



Steven St. John for The New York Times

Kevin Feige, head of Marvel Studios, is known as an "encyclopedia" of superheroes and has had multiple hit movies.

By BROOKS BARNES
Published: July 24, 2011

LOS ANGELES — Power in Hollywood is usually telegraphed in the least subtle way possible. People hopscotch to meetings by helicopter (Ryan Kavanaugh of Relativity Media), camp courtside at Lakers games (Jeffrey Katzenberg) and build HBO series around their antics (the superagent Ari Emanuel).

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Paramount Pictures and Marvel Entertainment
"Captain America: The First Avenger" took in \$65.8 million in ticket sales on its opening weekend.

Then there is Kevin Feige's approach.

Preening at the Polo Lounge? Mr. Feige, president of Marvel Studios, would rather go unnoticed in a darkened movie theater or in the aisles of a comic book shop. He lives in lumpy zip-up sweatshirts and his office is little more than a laptop. A favorite vacation spot is Walt Disney World, where he sweats in line like everybody else.

But make no mistake. Over the last few years, Mr. Feige, 38, has become one of the most powerful people in movies.

Though Warner Brothers and its DC Comics unit have strained to turn their lesser-known superheroes like Green Lantern into film stars, Mr. Feige has been on a tear. His

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But make no mistake. Over the last few years, Mr. Feige, 38, has become one of the most powerful people in movies.

Though Warner Brothers and its DC Comics unit have strained to turn their lesser-known superheroes like Green Lantern into film stars, Mr. Feige has been on a tear. His two "Iron Man" movies sold over \$1.2 billion in tickets worldwide; a third arrives in 2013.

"Thor," the potentially ridiculous tale of a pseudoviking with a magic hammer who can travel by rainbow, took in \$445 million since opening in May. And over the weekend "Captain America: The First Avenger" sold a stout \$65.8 million in tickets; a sequel is already in the works.

Mr. Feige has accomplished this by maintaining a careful balance of conservatism and risk. In an industry that loves to fiddle, he actually sticks close to the original material, recognizing that there is a reason Marvel characters like Iron Man attracted fans in the first place. But Mr. Feige also makes unusual bets on untested actors and hires directors who would give many studios serious pause.

“I’m not sure there is a formula or a secret,” said Mr. Feige, who also helped produce the hugely popular “Spider-Man” and “X-Men” movie franchises. “I do know that problems tend to happen when people try and re-invent the wheel. If you actually open the comics, there is a lot of depth there.”

Consider “Thor,” which cost about \$150 million to make, on par with other Marvel movies. Given the unusual subject matter, some screenwriters suggested remaking the character along the medieval lines of “The Lord of the Rings.” Falling back on something that has worked before is one of Hollywood’s favorite insurance policies, but Mr. Feige insisted on sticking to the comic’s DNA.

“Thor is just not a chicken-bone-in-the-beard kind of guy,” he said, taking a swig from a Starbucks iced coffee.

As a comics enthusiast himself, Mr. Feige (pronounced FIGH-gee) also acts as a pied piper, pulling just the right story and marketing levers to keep fans in the studio’s corner — an important skill at a time when one critical blog entry can create an online brush fire.

“Kevin actually understands what we want,” said Jonah Weiland, executive producer of ComicBookResources.com, a news and commentary site. “Other studios that make superhero movies often ignore the essence of the character,” he said, “or they make odd choices,” as when the Man of Steel suddenly had a son in “Superman Returns.”

Joss Whedon, the creator of “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” who is directing “The Avengers,” Marvel’s next movie, puts it this way: “Kevin is just a huge nerd. Possibly more than I am.”

But ask Mr. Feige about his track record, and his pale blue eyes start to dart and he squirms a bit in that sweatshirt. Maybe it is because he rarely agrees to lengthy interviews. Perhaps it is because he knows that his fortunes could swiftly reverse. Instead, he immediately credits success to his boss, Isaac Perlmutter, Marvel’s chief executive.

Even so, executives at the Walt Disney Company, which bought Marvel in 2009 for \$4 billion, cite Mr. Feige as an essential component of the acquisition, something of a comics counterpart to John Lasseter, the Pixar chief. The films on Mr. Feige’s Marvel résumé have sold about \$4.8 billion at the global box office.

Failure may not yet be part of Mr. Feige’s Marvel tenure, but there have been some close calls. “The Incredible Hulk,” produced in conjunction with Universal Pictures in 2008, drew decent reviews, but was a commercial disappointment, costing \$150 million but attracting

only \$135 million in tickets in North America. And critical rapture has been harder for Marvel to come by since the first “Iron Man” film.

Mr. Feige, who is married to a cardiothoracic nurse and has a 2-year-old daughter, grew up in Westfield, N.J. He says he never wanted to do anything but work in movies. He remembers wallpapering his bedroom with posters for “Back to the Future Part II.” An inspiration was his grandfather, Robert Short, who produced soap operas like “Guiding Light.”

While attending the University of Southern California in the 1990s, Mr. Feige got an internship with the producer Lauren Shuler Donner, who hired him as an assistant after graduation. He helped her with projects like “You’ve Got Mail” — he was assigned to teach Meg Ryan how to use e-mail — and, when she started working on the “X-Men” movies, made Mr. Feige a producer.

“As a walking encyclopedia of Marvel, he was really indispensable in those early days,” Ms. Donner said. (Pressed to name one of Mr. Feige’s faults, Ms. Donner finally said, “O.K., neatness is not his forte.”)

Along the way, he has acquired his own set of superpowers, including the ability to heat up or cool off careers in an instant — casting Robert Downey Jr., known for his trouble with the law, in “Iron Man” or replacing Edward Norton with Mark Ruffalo as the Hulk in “The Avengers.”

Despite his fan tendencies, Mr. Feige has an eye for how much comic lore is too much for the average audience. Some comics fans criticize Marvel’s movies as bland as a result. But striking a balance, industry insiders say, is one reason “Thor” succeeded while, Warner’s “Watchmen,” for example, did not. “Kevin knows how to translate comic book properties into a mainstream aesthetic,” said Tom Rothman, co-chairman of Fox Filmed Entertainment, which controls the “X-Men” movie rights.

Since superhero outfits can come across as cheesy on screen, for example, Mr. Feige usually acknowledges the original look and then waters it down. Thor got to keep his cape, but he is shown only in that silly winged helmet once. (“Is there a Renaissance Faire in town?” one character jokes.) In the 1960s, when Stan Lee was editing and writing nonstop for Marvel, he broke fresh ground in comics by intertwining the roster of characters and stories into a shared universe. Now Mr. Feige is doing the same thing with the movies, first introducing characters like Captain America and Iron Man to multiplex audiences and then, as Mr. Lee

did in the comics, weaving them together as a team called the Avengers that will have its own series of films.

Mr. Feige is characteristically low key about that plan, which is one of the most ambitious undertakings in Hollywood history. “I would feel the same amount of pressure for each film to work even if we weren’t leading up to something,” he said.

Recent weeks have found Mr. Feige on the New Mexico set of “The Avengers,” which will be released in the spring. One day he excitedly approached Mr. Whedon with a teaser poster for the movie that had just been printed. Did Mr. Whedon want one?

“I answered, ‘Yes — or an original Monet,’” Mr. Whedon said. “And Kevin responded in all seriousness, ‘A Monet? I’d much rather have this poster.’

“I think Marvel has the right guy for the job,” Mr. Whedon said.