

# Recreating 'Aladdin's' magic with Smith and fresh faces

By Lindsey Bahr and Cindy Martin

In 1992, Disney transported audiences to the mythical land of Agrabah, where they met a street rat with a heart of gold, a flying carpet, a headstrong princess and a magical genie with some oddly current pop culture references. With the music and lyrics of Alan Menken, Howard Ashman and Tim Rice, "Aladdin" would go on to win the hearts of millions and become the highest-grossing picture of the year.

It was an ambitious animation project that paid off and generated decades of fan goodwill, not to mention the two Oscars and a future Broadway musical. Now, following in the lucrative footsteps of "Beauty and the Beast" and others, the studio is taking another shot at "Aladdin", this time in live-action. The film, from director Guy Ritchie, opens nationwide Friday.

But how do you recreate the magic of "Aladdin" without the help of a genie's lamp?

Well, getting a movie star like Will Smith on board doesn't hurt. Smith agreed to play the Genie. The part was originated by the late Robin Williams, who brought his signature irreverence and wit and modern references to the role. But even with Smith's bona fides, he was nervous. Williams' performance has become iconic in the past 27 years. In other words, it would be a tough act to follow.

"It was not a no-brainer," Smith said. "I was really terrified at first.

You know, you have to be careful with these types of films that mark people's childhoods."

Smith and the filmmakers knew that remaking "Aladdin" would inevitably involve a delicate dance of paying homage to the original while also modernizing some aspects of the story, including casting ethnically appropriate leads, who could sing and dance and carry a large scale production, and giving a character like Princess Jasmine more agency.

## Play

They found Egyptian-born and Canada-raised actor Mena Massoud to play Aladdin and British actress Naomi Scott, who is of half South Asian descent, to play Jasmine.

"She was one of my favorite princesses," Scott said. "I think I gravitated toward her because of her strength and because I felt like I saw myself in her."

In this film, she's fighting for equality and the opportunity to succeed her father as Sultan.

"It's just about her being human and more well-rounded," said Scott. She even gets her own empowerment anthem in a new original song called "Speechless," written by Menken, and fellow Oscar-winning songwriters Benj Pasek and Justin Paul ("The Greatest Showman", "La La Land").

Menken was the bridge between past and present for the production, and said he had to be both the "keeper of the flame of the original" and "part of a new team."

"When you're working at Disney you have a lot of people keeping an eye, a very careful eye, on the legacy," Menken said. "So I am very protective."

Naturally, the filmmakers wanted to give the production an epic feeling fitting of an overseas action-adventure musical.

"Aladdin" was shot on a massive soundstage outside of London, where the Agrabah set spanned the size of two football fields, and on location in Jordan, including at Wadi Rum. It was not lost on Ritchie that "Lawrence of Arabia" was also filmed there. Since there's no real city of Agrabah, production designer Gemma Jackson ("Game of Thrones") used elements of Moroccan, Persian and Turkish architecture as inspiration.

As far as musical numbers go, the biggest production of the film by far is the "Prince Ali" sequence, where Aladdin, with the Genie's help, enters the city as they think royalty would, boasting of his great wealth, bravery and an assortment of animals including 75 golden camels, 53 peacocks and 95 white Persian monkeys.

Ritchie employed 250 dancers and 200 extras to flesh out the world and commissioned a 30-foot high camel made of 37,000 flower heads for "Ali" to ride in on. (AP)

Film

## Variety



Actress Margot Robbie (from left), Quentin Tarantino, actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Brad Pitt pose for photographers upon arrival at the premiere of the film 'Once Upon a Time in Hollywood' at the 72nd international film festival, Cannes, southern France on May 21. (AP)

## Cannes

With Brad and Leo, Tarantino debuts a fairy tale in Cannes

# 'H'wood', a dazzling ode to cinema

By Owen Gleiberman

It has been 25 years to the day since Quentin Tarantino's "Pulp Fiction" premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, crystalizing a cinema revolution, and we have never looked back. Yet here's one more QT anniversary, a bit less monumental but, in its way, as meaningful: It has been 10 years since the premiere of "Inglourious Basterds", which also took place at Cannes — and for me, at least, that means it's been a decade since Quentin Tarantino gave us an unambiguously great Quentin Tarantino movie.

You know the difference as well as I do, because it's one that you can feel in your heart, gut, and soul: the difference between a Quentin movie that's got dazzle and brilliance and a number of hypnotic sequences, and is every inch the work of his fevered movie candy brain, and a Quentin film that enters your bloodstream like a drug and stays there, inviting (compelling!) you to watch it again and again, because it's a virtuoso piece of the imagination from first shot to last — and every moment is marked by a certain ineffable something, the Tarantino X Factor that made "Pulp Fiction" the indie touchstone of its time.

"Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood", which premiered today at Cannes, is not that X Factor movie — though for long stretches (a good more than half of it), it feels like it could be. It comes closer than "Django Unchained" or (God knows) "The Hateful Eight". It's a heady, engrossing, kaleidoscopic, spectacularly detailed nostalgic splatter collage of a film, an epic tale of backlot Hollywood in 1969, which allows Tarantino to pile on all his obsessions, from drive-ins to donuts, from girls with guns to men with cars and vendettas, from spaghetti Westerns to foot fetishism. In this case, he doesn't have to work very hard to find spaces for those fixations, since Tarantino, in this 2-hour-and-41-minute tale of a

Hollywood caught between eras, is reaching back to the very source of his dreams.

In "Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood", Tarantino tells the dual story of Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio), who starred in a black-and-white TV Western series called "Bounty Law" in the late '50s and early '60s, but whose career is now hitting the skids; and Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt), Rick's longtime stunt double and best pal, who has basically become his gofer and driver.

Both are drawing, easy-going good ol' boys who are functional drunks, and they've been kicked around Hollywood, but they've got a yin-and-yang thing going.

## Instinctive

Rick, who appears to be based at least partly on Burt Reynolds, is an instinctive actor, a gentle charmer, and a secret softie in a brown-leather jacket — the first Tarantino hero to prove that real men do cry. Cliff, by contrast, is a war veteran and rough-and-tumble stud bruiser who lives in a cruddy trailer next to the Van Nuys Drive-In but seems happy and satisfied, like most Brad Pitt characters, with himself. When he's crossed, he will kick the bejesus out of anyone, and he's got a bad reputation.

The first half of "Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood", which is the superior half, is set in February '69, and Tarantino views these two characters with a straight-up macho humanity that is gratifyingly unironic. DiCaprio and Pitt fill out their roles with such rawhide movie-star conviction that we're happy to settle back and watch Tarantino unfurl this tale in any direction he wants. And he does digress, in that following-his-free-associational-bliss way.

In "Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood", Tarantino re-creates the Hollywood of 50 years ago with a fantastically detailed and almost swoony time-machine precision, and it's not just about the

marquees and the billboards featuring end-of-the-studio-system-era corn like "Three in an Attic", or all the juicy Top 40 chestnuts on the soundtrack. The movie captures how Hollywood, by 1969, was a head-spinningly layered place.

Here's the TV-cowboy mystique of the '60s, which is really a degraded schlock echo of the movie-cowboy culture of the '50s. Here's the rock 'n' roll of the moment (like Paul Revere and the Raiders or "Snoopy vs Red Baron"), which popped like crazy yet with a rambunctious easy-listening bounce. And here, beyond the music, is the new noisiness of America: the "hip" commercials blaring from transistor radios, the TV sets that never get turned off, the flamboyant hippie garb that's starting to go mainstream, turning the counterculture into a living fashion boutique.

Here's a Playboy Mansion party where Steve McQueen (Damian Lewis) is hanging out, as you might expect him to be, but then so is Mama Cass (Rachel Redleaf). McQueen, talking to Rick, fills in the back story of Sharon, Roman, and their friend Jay Sebring (Emile Hirsch), the hairdresser who is still in love with Sharon — and, according to McQueen, is hanging around with them because he's biding his time, waiting for Roman to screw up his marriage. At that point, we're hooked enough on Tarantino's heightened version of true-life Hollywood that this love triangle sounds like a little movie of its own.

You can say, as many will, that it's only a movie. But for much of "Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood", Tarantino brilliantly uses the presence of the Manson girls to suggest something in the Hollywood cosmos that's diabolical in its bad vibes. And the way the movie resolves all this feels, frankly, too easy. By the end, Tarantino has done something that's quintessentially Tarantino, but that no longer feels even vaguely revolutionary. He has reduced the story he's telling to pulp. (RTRS)

**LOS ANGELES:** Greta Bellamacina will star in "Thomasina", an upcoming horror movie from Jaclyn Bethany. Raleigh McDonald ("The Sinner") has also signed on for the movie, which is set in the underbelly of LA.

Director and actress Bellamacina has been in the news at Cannes after being refused entry to the Marche with her baby son, then being told she needed to pay an accreditation fee for the infant, a procedure that would take 48 hours to process. The organizers said there was a mix-up on the ground and that it had fixed the situation, but it was an embarrassing incident at a moment when gender equality is firmly in the spotlight.

The "Thomasina" announcement and casting is more regular Cannes news. McDonald, who has been starring in "Matilda" on Broadway, plays the titular character in the picture, a mysterious, down-on-her-luck teenager whose life begins to spin out of control after her mother's murder. Bellamacina plays her sister. (RTRS)

**LOS ANGELES:** David Glasser's 101 Studios is positioning the long-shelved and revamped "The Current War", starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Michael Shannon, for an awards-season release in October.

101 Studios announced Tuesday that the film would open in limited release on Oct. 4, then go wide on the following weekend. The film presents the story of the "war of the currents" between Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse over which electrical system would power the modern world. Cumberbatch stars as Edison while Shannon portrays Westinghouse. Nicholas Hoult stars as Nikola Tesla.

The film, which premiered at the 2017 Toronto Film Festival, was to be distributed later that year by the Weinstein Company but was shelved following the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse allegations. 101 Studios bought the North American rights several months ago from Lantern Entertainment, which handled the TWC assets.

The cast includes Katherine Waterston, Tuppence Middleton, Tom Holland and Matthew Macfadyen. Director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon has added five additional scenes and cut 10 minutes from the version that premiered in Toronto. (RTRS)

**LOS ANGELES:** The first full



Cumberbatch



Bellamacina

trailer for "Downton Abbey", the much-anticipated movie spin-off of the hit TV series, has been released. The trailer for the Focus Features title was released on the film's official Twitter account after debuting on NBC morning show "Today".

While little of the plot has been given away to date it is known to take place in 1927, a

couple of years after the end of the TV series, and center around the royal visit of King George V and Queen Mary to Downton Abbey. The trailer shows the Crawley family and their army of servants preparing for the unexpected visit which prompts Michelle Dockery's Lady Mary to ask retired head butler Carson (Jim Carter) to return to the

estate. Exhibitors got a first look at the new trailer at CinemaCon in April.

The movie sees the period drama's biggest stars, including Hugh Bonneville, Maggie Smith, Laura Carmichael, Penelope Wilton, and Elizabeth McGovern, as well as Dockery and Carter, all return. (RTRS)