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On the Horizon: Ron Howard Drove 'Rush' Fundraising

Director Personally Pitched the Racing Film to Buyers, Distributors

By **ALEXANDRA CHENEY**

Before Oscar-winning director Ron Howard was able to take the wheel of "Rush," a biopic about the legendary rivalry between Formula One drivers Niki Lauda and James Hunt, he had to secure the film's funding, something he had never needed to do on one of his movies.



Associated Press

'Rush' was made for \$50 million. Above, filming in London last year.

At the 2011 American Film Market, an annual event where movie-production and -distribution deals are made, Mr. Howard personally pitched the film to buyers and distributors. With entertainment company Exclusive Media, Mr. Howard secured \$38 million through international presales, the final funding needed to begin principal photography.

"We had no safety net and the potential for disaster was quite high," said Andrew Eaton of London-based Revolution Films, the first producer to sign on to the project.

As the major studios continue to fuel projects with sky-high budgets—primarily sequels, reboots and films with built-in superfans, such as those based on videogames and comic books—midrange original projects are struggling to find footing.

"If a studio did this film, the budget would be over \$100 million," said Brian Oliver, the president of Cross Creek Pictures, which co-financed "Rush" with Exclusive Media. "But with an indie, goodwill comes into the picture."

Because "Rush" takes place during the 1976 Formula One racing season, \$2 million of the film's \$50 million budget immediately went to building nine replica race cars. An additional \$10 million was set aside for the visual effects needed for the crash and racing scenes, including the devastating accident at the 1976 German Grand Prix that caused Mr. Lauda, (played by Daniel Brühl) to lapse into a coma with roughly half his face severely burned. Mr. Lauda returned to racing 41 days later, a fact that sparked the interest of Peter Morgan, the Oscar-nominated screenwriter who wrote "Rush," and collaborated with Mr. Howard on "Frost/Nixon."

"Rush" stars "Thor's" Chris Hemsworth as Mr. Hunt, is scored by Hans Zimmer and counts Brian Grazer and Mr. Howard among its 16 producers. The film was shot over four months in the U.K. and Germany, with "everybody making less than their quotes," or asking fees, Mr. Oliver said.

Producer Eric Fellner persuaded Ferrari and McLaren, two of the racing teams featured in the film, to let "Rush" use their brands without sacrificing editorial control. Mr. Fellner had previously established relationships with the companies while he was working on "Senna," the documentary about Ayrton Senna, another Formula One driver.

Mr. Eaton tracked down 24 original 1976 Formula One cars, striking a deal with their owners; the cars would appear in the film, with their current owners behind the wheel.

"I'm slightly shocked that we got away with it," Mr. Eaton said. "Fortunately, drivers are virtually unrecognizable in fire suits and helmets with shields, but still."

The film, distributed domestically by Universal Pictures, will make its North American debut at the Toronto Film Festival on Sept. 8, followed by a limited-platform release in New York and Los Angeles on Sept. 20. The film will add a wide release on roughly 2,000 screens the following Friday, Sept. 27.

Formula One continues its struggle to find a U.S. audience, despite the circuit's new broadcasting deal with NBC Sports Network, which will air all 20 races. The Monaco Grand Prix, one of four F1 races to air live on NBC this year, was viewed in May by 1.5 million people. According to Nielsen, it is the most watched Formula One race on U.S. television in six years.

Unlike the movie's international marketing strategy, which emphasizes the Formula One backdrop, the U.S. promotional campaign for "Rush" focuses on Messrs. Hemsworth and Howard.

"I'm not a fan of Formula One," said Nikki Rocco, Universal's distribution president, "but the first time I saw the movie, the emotion I felt, it just hit me as a quintessential Ron Howard film." Ms. Rocco said she is relying heavily on word of mouth, especially because Exclusive Media and Cross Creek Pictures will premiere "Rush" in 16 foreign markets, including the U.K., prior to its debut in the U.S.

Major U.S.-based studios usually seek domestic debuts for films before their introductions in foreign markets.

To secure predominate placement abroad, Mr. Howard allowed about 40 distributors to come on set. Once there, he dressed them up in costume and makeup as extras and put them in the film, said Guy East, the co-chairman of Exclusive Media, who led the film's international marketing and distribution deals.

"We managed to secure the best theaters around the world and coordinated so that the film comes out everywhere within a month," Mr. East said. As is common, the only territory excluded from that schedule is Japan, where "Rush" will premiere in February.

"The film, it's got to be dramatic and interesting and dynamic, or else it's just two guys in crash helmets going around in circles," Mr. Eaton said.

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