

The Scribes of S



FROM LEFT Jonathan Aibel (*Kung Fu Panda 2*), Greg Berlanti (*Green Lantern*), Christopher Markus (*Captain America: The First Avenger*), Ehren Kruger (*Transformers: Dark of the Moon*), Roberto Orci (*Cowboys & Aliens*) and Ashley Edward Miller (*Thor*, *X-men: First Class*); photographed April 8 at Siren Studios in Los Angeles.

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The writers behind this season's (hopeful) blockbusters talk about staying true to their vision while keeping big studios happy

BY Jay A. Fernandez • PHOTOGRAPHED BY Kevin Scanlon

WRITING A TENTPOLE SUMMER MOVIE CAN MEAN huge rewards, but it's also rife with extra pressure. An exercise in politics as much as creativity, these colossal productions often require a screenwriter to collaborate not only with directors and producers but also with the toy industry, comic book companies, merchandising entities, rabid fans, marketing execs, storyboard artists, the laws of physics, previous movies and source material and, usually, a host of other unseen writers. In a roundtable discussion equal parts wry realism and clever insight, Jonathan Aibel (*Kung Fu Panda 2*, which opens May 26), Greg Berlanti (*Green Lantern*, June 17), Ehren Kruger (*Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, July 1), Christopher Markus (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, July 22), Ashley Edward Miller (*Thor*, May 6; *X-Men: First Class*, June 3) and Roberto Orci (*Cowboys & Aliens*, July 29) lay bare just how the blockbuster sausage is made—and why it can be the coolest job imaginable.

How would you define the elements of a perfect summer movie? And has it changed from your childhood?

EHREN KRUGER There are three things: It needs to make you cheer, it needs to make you gasp, and it needs to make you laugh.

ROBERTO ORCI And has role play. It has to make you want to be in that world.

ASHLEY EDWARD MILLER I think that a great summer movie has gotta have an emotional experience at the core of it. When you are 7 years old, you go to see *Star Wars* for the first time, and there's that moment when Luke's on Tatooine; he's looking out, it grabs you. If you look at the great summer films of the '70s and '80s, they had that emotional experience. And I think that as an adult, you crave that too.

JONATHAN AIBEL With animated films, they take so long that you don't really know it's a summer movie because you've had four years of spring-summer-fall-winter. [Laughter] And with DreamWorks, when we make two movies a year, maybe three, they all have to do all these things whether it comes out in November or March. It's just that summer is the time when as a culture we come to expect that

and want that. For me, it feels like it's in the past 10 years that this has really become a thing, an event. Where when I was a kid and I went to these movies, I have no recollection of when I went to see them.

GREG BERLANTI With *Green Lantern*, from the very beginning we always discussed, "What kind of genre is this if it's not a comic book movie?" For us, it was a fusion of a space opera mixed with an action-adventure on Earth. I remember being a kid and seeing the ad for *Star Wars* and saying, "I want to see that." I remember going to *Superman* and coming home and making anything I could into a cape as quickly as I could and dashing around the house. It's very rewarding to suddenly be a part of something where you go: "Oh, OK, we're melding those two worlds together. We're trying to do something that, we hope, some kid out there can have the same kind of experience we had."

When you guys are working in an environment where you know you're up against so much other spectacle [including one another's films] how do you make sure that yours stands out?

CHRISTOPHER MARKUS The only way to stand out is to not compete. Because if you're sitting there going, "I'm doing *Captain America*, but I know they're making *Transformers*, so we ought to put some robots in here," you'll go nuts. So this is a movie, about this guy Steve Rogers, and treat him as humanly as possible and make essentially a biopic about your main character. Then it'll stand on its own as a solid movie and compete on its own merits. Because you can't roll it out and say, "It's gonna have 90 percent more *Matrix* and 35 percent *Hangover*." There are executives who would kill to be able to program that, but ...

Are there a lot of *Hangover* elements in *Captain America*?

MARKUS Oh, yeah. He is actually drunk for about 90 percent of the movie. [Laughter.]

KRUGER I would say that you definitely have to be true to your mythology and your source material. I do think if you had a group of directors here, they might have a different opinion on the idea of standing out and competing because many of these movies are greenlit now based on previsualized animated sequences that are the moments that are really designed to wow the audience or stand out in a trailer. When we are trying to design sequences that fit our narrative, there is a piece of our brains — and if there isn't, as soon as we're working with the filmmaker, they're going to be hammering at that piece of our brains — that says, "What are we doing that hasn't been seen

before?" Whatever the scale of the movie, I think we're all aware that we need that in our picture.

ORCI And the last thing is our choices; you have to get back in touch with your inner fan. We have the luck of having grown up on a lot of this stuff, and by merely saying yes to doing *Green Lantern* or something, you are saying, "That stands out to me." Hopefully. If you have integrity [laughter]. You gotta for a minute be a kid looking at the concept that's presented to you and go, "I want to see that." If you want to see it, that's the first clue that it might stand out.

MILLER And the unique purview of the writer is connecting those big visuals to the emotional content. If you're emotionally involved, if you're passionate about what you're writing, if you care about the characters, that's going to come through on the page. The actors are going to pick that up, the director is going to put that into his movie, and the audience is going to experience it.

Many of you have worked with pretty strong-minded, visionary directors. How do you manage those relationships in terms of what you're trying to bring to it when those ideas don't line up?

ORCI Two hats. Always try and act like you're one of the problem solvers, like a producer. You put on your producer hat and you put on your screenwriter hat, even if you're not technically a producer on the movie. Just do it. Acknowledge that part of it is a business, and then be able to be in the problems of the movie.



MARKUS Dealing with the director, I generally go into it — maybe this is my natural self-deprecation — but I think he knows far more about the physical making of the movie than I do. So Steve [McFeely] and I can sit there and dream up 8,000 action sequences where a tank flies off a cliff or something, and then there's this moment where you sit down and go, "OK, I'm now with the guy who actually has to make a tank fly off a cliff." And if he tells me, "It would be easier to do *this*," I have to respect that. A lot of the time, their thing is better than my thing because theirs can actually happen with the physics of the world — so it's going to hit you harder on the screen.

AIBEL My partner and I saw our role to be there for the director to remind her at any point, "The story point is this, the emotion of the character is here, and even though you're dealing with these huge issues, we'll be there to whisper what the character's thinking."

Do you have examples of how those relationships played out on a particular piece of the script?

KRUGER We get involved in the process at different stages, but if we had the luxury, we could each go off for three months by ourselves and write a draft of one of these pictures — usually we don't have that luxury — and then Jon Favreau could direct the movie, or Michael Bay could direct the movie, or

Martin Campbell could direct the movie. As we start to rewrite per that director's vision, at the end of the process you would have three scripts that no longer resemble the original at all. At that point, our job is to make sure we are serving the story best and defending the emotional components of the narrative while working with that filmmaker. If I sit down with Michael Bay and say: "You know what? I see this more as a Paul Greengrass style movie ...," that's the last sentence out of my mouth, and I'm out the door, right? [laughter] But what I do know is that I'm going to work with this director's very strong authorial vision, and whatever I come up with for a set piece, he's going to inject with human growth hormone and make it something wilder than I could imagine. But at the point where he says, "I want to cut this sequence because I find it boring," and it may be a sequence that I feel is important to the emotional journey, then I have to stand my ground, and I have to fight him.



From left: Aibel, Miller and Markus

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Watch the entire roundtable at THR's site for exclusive video of the writers' discussion.



From left:
Berlanti,
Kruger
and Orci

And how does that usually work out?

KRUGER If I make my case well, it works out.

Do you have an example from Transformers 3?

KRUGER Well, certainly there are ... [long pause] I have more examples from *Transformers 2*. [laughter all around]

ORCI Two weeks before the [2007-08 WGA] strike, we handed Bay a 30-page treatment, then he went off and turned it into 70 pages. He started prepping the movie, and because of the time constraints, he got totally locked in. By then, we were locked in a hotel room for three months because the strike had just ended. So it was me, Ehren and Alex [Kurtzman] in a hotel room every day so he could drop by at noon, see what we had, take pages, and then go prep the movie because it's gotta go shoot!

KRUGER Many of those things, under a normal process, would have been considered a first-draft outline. And then suddenly you're locked into some of those things. At that point, it becomes very difficult — and very expensive — to try to rework macro ideas. Added to which, he was a bit cross about us going on strike in the first place!

ORCI He blamed us for the strike. [laughter]

Bay made a comment recently that the second film was "crap."

ORCI The release could have been pushed back, but he considers himself kind of a jobs program. And for him, the idea of pushing the movie means all these people who rely on him lose work and they're in between jobs, etc.

KRUGER Also — and maybe, Bob, you'd agree — a lot of it was reacting to people's feeling from the first movie, "Well, we want to see so much more of the robots and more action, we just got a little taste of it." I think the second movie was a bit of an example of assembling spectacles and trying to make the narrative work in a sort of connect-the-dots way.

ORCI He's reasonable when he's not mad at you. You just fight, and he'll pay attention. When we met him on *The Island*, his first question to us was, "Why should I trust you?" Our answer was: "You shouldn't yet. Let's see what happens."

You've got action figures and plush toys at stake — to what extent has that actually played into the writing and developing of the script?

BERLANTI We had a lifesize Kilowog, who's this big, hulking beast that's a friend of the lead characters in the Green Lantern

Corps. And now, starting to see those toys come out, it's definitely a surreal experience.

ORCI For *Transformers 2*, we had to throw in the Chevy Volt. Actually someone asked me on one of the websites, "Hey, did you have to put the Chevy Volt in?" And I said, "Yeah, we had to stuff him in there." And I guess someone

So the military is pitching you on this?

ORCI "We got this new railgun that we really like ..."

MARKUS "Can you advertise our gun?" [laughter]

ORCI It's insane. [To Kruger] Am I lying?

Any of that on Transformers 3?

KRUGER I've had a couple of

"My partner and I will get the scripts and help punch up Po's jokes in the McDonald's ads, and it isn't like, 'Oh, we're selling out!' It's, 'We want people to see our movie.'"

— Jonathan Aibel

got an angry call from the car company. [laughter] Which I apologized for.

AIBEL You just said it again.

ORCI I just said it again. And then the giant railgun that we had to get in, where the military's got this new gun that can shoot a projectile 100 miles off the coast. So now we have to make sure that wherever we are in Egypt, it's close enough to the coast that the railgun can hit the thing at the top of the pyramid.

experiences now with Hasbro. *Transformers* exists because it originated as a toy. They're looking at a franchise that the last movie grossed \$800 million, and they sold \$800 million worth of toys. But they never look at it like: "All right, guys, this third movie is an advertising platform for us." They look at it like: "Whatever's going to be the most entertaining movie, you go make that. We will inform you of the existing mythology, and we want to be a resource that can help you however we can." That said, there is a meeting where they will say: "Here are our toy sales for the last picture. These are the characters that really sold well, these are the characters that sold not so great, and these are the characters that really didn't sell at all. If you so choose ..." [laughter] "... not to put in the characters that didn't sell well at all, if you don't want to bring them back for this movie, that would be OK with us." [laughter]

AIBEL You would think that because *Kung Fu Panda* is animated that there would be that pressure. There really isn't any. Or they just keep it from me. That said, yes, it's a little strange to see a panda who exists in ancient China in a commercial for Happy Meals. My partner and I will get the scripts and help punch up Po's jokes in the McDonald's ads, and it isn't like, 'Oh, we're selling out!' It's, 'We want people to see our movie.'

The Films They Wrote



AIBEL
Kung Fu Panda 2



ORCI
Cowboys & Aliens



MILLER
Thor



BERLANTI
Green Lantern



MARKUS
Captain America: Avenger



KRUGER
Transformers: Moon

How do the deep source material and fervent fan bases influence you, and to what extent do you engage with that?

MILLER You have to start as a fan. Look, the nice thing about working for Marvel, on *Thor*, when we walked in there and sat down with them, was that we never had to explain to them what was cool about *Thor*. They knew! I collected *Thor* like crazy as a kid; I have the entire Walt Simonson run on *Thor*. I have my opinions as a fan. Other fans have their opinions, and I either agree with them or I don't. But you have to come to it that way. The most difficult thing in terms of watching fan reaction to things is that the fans have a relationship with the source material and they have a relationship with the film material, and the reality is that you're mainly trying to service the film material. Fans' opinions obviously affect your box office, but they can't affect the creative choices you make.

MARKUS I think if you know you respect the material, you have that. Then you deal with whatever comes. I've gone on the Internet, especially with the *Narnia* movies, where you have these very fervent people for various reasons ...

KRUGER Why did you go on the Internet?

MARKUS Because the only alternative was writing. [laughter] And somebody will say, "I can't believe they're doing this ..." And I'll get kind of angry, and then

I'll realize more than likely my day has just been ruined by a 10-year-old. You gotta go, "OK, but that person cares." I'm writing about something that people care about; this has people all over the world typing about it. So you're like, "Even if they hate me, this is great!"

ORCI The screenwriter, in the minds of many, is the most realistic or accessible entry point to having the dream come true of coming and working in Hollywood — because none of us has to

be true to that mythology and respect that mythology, but he's got to find the universal themes in it and some new adventure that is going to make people who have never heard the words Green Lantern before in their lives interested in learning about this story. [To Berlanti] Hopefully, you don't feel that pressure. [laughter]

ORCI Give the guy a break!

MARKUS "You're screwed!"

KRUGER Same with *Thor*; you're dead! [laughter]

"With the scale of these movies that we're talking about, our job is not really to appease existing fans as much as it is to create new fans."

— Ehren Kruger

look like a movie star to do it. So part of it is kind of acknowledging that dream a little bit. It is a little bit of proving you're a fan, and you only do it on the properties where you have the true respect. Because they can smell it otherwise.

KRUGER With the scale of these movies that we're talking about, our job is not really to appease existing fans as much as it is to create new fans. Because if Greg is writing a movie that is going to speak only to men and women who have ever purchased a *Green Lantern* comic book, he's dead. He's gotta

MILLER Hung on the Tree of Woe ...

ORCI It's a campaign. The base has to be happy, but you don't win the campaign without getting the independents. That's what Favreau says.

KRUGER Right. In that respect, I don't think we approach writing a big summer movie any differently than we approach writing a small, independent movie. The fact that someone's spending \$200 million on it or \$10 million on it doesn't really change our process at all. It changes the level of ...

ORCI Client services.

KRUGER Palace intrigue.

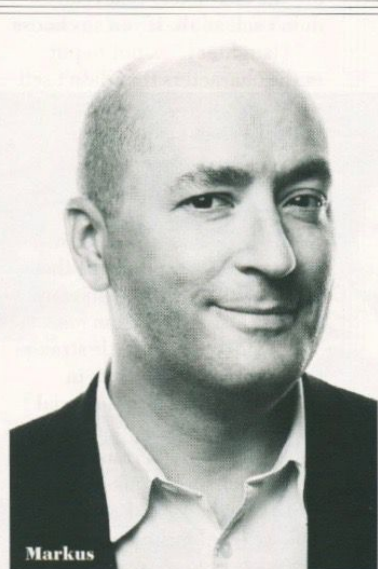
What is the summer movie from your childhood that really stuck with you?

MARKUS *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I mean, I don't believe I'd ever thought of a bullwhip at all prior to seeing that, and afterward I came home and I literally made my own whip. Which is a little kinky for a 12-year-old. But that movie was everything I wanted in a movie, and I had no idea I wanted it beforehand. And Joe Johnston, who directed *Captain America*, worked on that movie, which is another reason it's really hard to argue with him when he says, "I'd like the action sequence to go like this," and you realize he actually storyboarded that truck chase in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. You're like: "OK. You can have what you want, Joe."

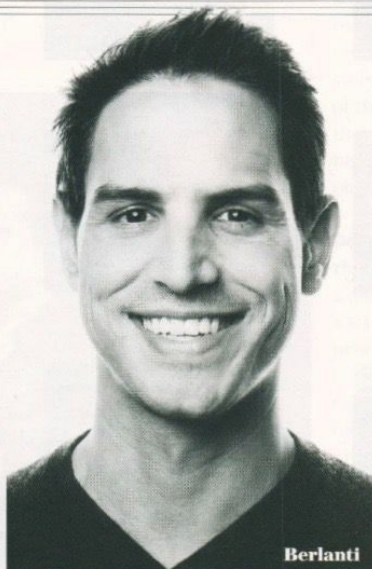
AIBEL I just remember back in the day of the singleplex — where in my town I think it was *Raiders*, *Big*, *Die Hard* — where you'd watch the movie and then you'd say, "I'm staying; I'm going to watch it again." Those were the first movies I remember going, "Everything about this just spoke to me." You look back at *Raiders*, and it's just perfect.

ORCI I saw *E.T.* at a drive-in with my parents and my brother. Amazing. And then the summer of *Back to the Future* — it was oversold, and I actually had to sit in the aisle to watch it. It was the greatest thing ever.

KRUGER I can remember going to see *Jaws 3D* and sitting in



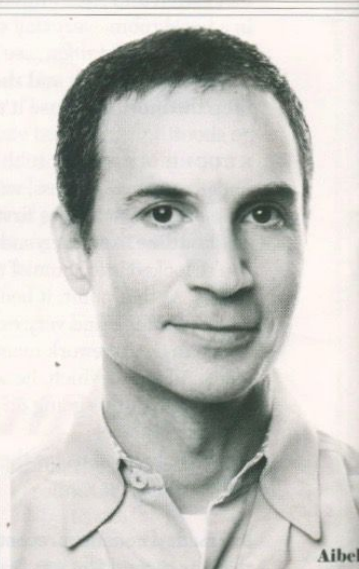
Markus



Berlanti



Kruger



Aibel

Hall of Fame Summer Scribes

How much global box office can the right writer generate?

the front row and watching that picture and thinking: 'I don't know, maybe I could do a little better than this. I should look into this.'

BERLANTI My birthday is May 24, which is always around Memorial Day weekend, so I would get out of school for the day and get to go see whatever the first big movie was. The two that pop into my mind are *The Empire Strikes Back*, just because so many things were happening that I didn't expect. And the other one I remember from the summer is *Rocky III*, when he fights Clubber Lang. And I just remember standing up out of my seat and cheering in the final fight! A lot of times when we're working on a story sequence, we'll say: "Is this *Rocky I*? Are we doing *Rocky II*? Are we doing *Rocky III*? Does he get his comeuppance? Is he coming for the comeback? Does he just want to stay in the ring?" So they really imprint on you and last with you your whole life.

Do you feel like it's different with these types of tentpole movies for writers in terms of who gets the blame if something fails?

BERLANTI I hope so!
ORCI Sometimes you get the blame even when it worked. [laughter] I track the box-office stuff more of as a student of the process and just wanting to know as much as possible. Just in case you want to spin what the psychological Monday-morning

take-home is going to be. It's a strange time, for sure. It's not like nothing's happening.

MARKUS I want to know Monday or Tuesday how it did. Throughout the weekend, I just want to feel like: "I have a movie out! It's got my name on it!"

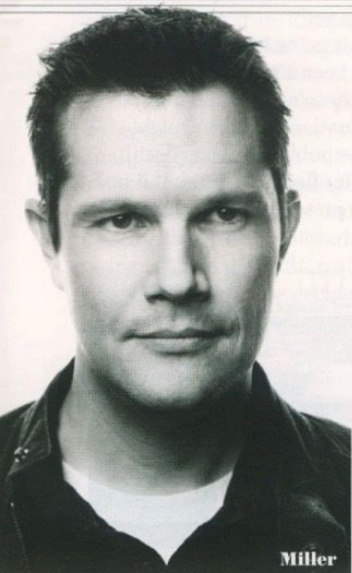
ORCI That's a good idea.

How do you ultimately measure the value of your own contribution when you see the finished product?

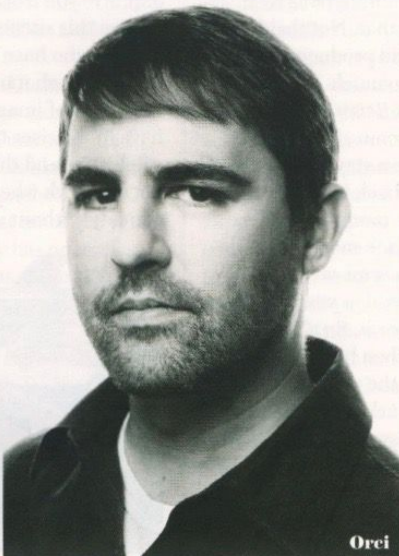
ORCI I always think of it as like a band, and we put out a great song. And maybe you played lead guitar, maybe you played drums. On *Cowboys & Aliens*, we got Ron Howard, Steven Spielberg, Brian Grazer, Jon Favreau directing it, three studios — Paramount, Universal, DreamWorks. I guess that's an orchestra.

AIBEL Like ELO. [laughter] On *Panda*, I worked on it maybe four years. So I'll watch it and say: "Hey, that line's really funny. Where'd that come from?" **THR**

EDITOR'S NOTE: Most of these screenwriters have writing partners. In order to keep the discussion manageable, THR asked each team to send just one person. Aibel writes with Glenn Berger (*Kung Fu Panda*, *Atvin* and *the Chipmunks: The Squeakquel*, *Monsters vs. Aliens*). Berlanti writes with Michael Green and Marc Guggenheim, Markus writes with Stephen McFeely (the three *Chronicles of Narnia* films), Miller writes with Zack Stentz, Orci writes with Alex Kurtzman (*Transformers*, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, *Star Trek*), and Kruger (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, *The Ring*, *Scream 3*) writes alone.



Miller



Orci



DAVID KOEPP
\$4.83 BILLION

Angels & Demons, May 2009, \$486m / *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, May 2008, \$787m / *War of the Worlds*, June 2005, \$592m / *Spider-Man*, May 2002, \$822m / *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, May 1997, \$619m / *Mission: Impossible*, May 1996, \$458m / *Jurassic Park*, June 1993, \$915m / *Death Becomes Her*, July 1992, \$149m



GEORGE LUCAS
\$3.79 BILLION

Star Wars: Episode III - Revenge of the Sith, May 2005, \$849m / *Star Wars: Episode II - Attack of the Clones*, May 2002, \$649m / *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace*, May 1999, \$924m / *Return of the Jedi*, May 1983, \$475m / *Star Wars*, May 1977, \$775m / *American Graffiti*, August 1973, \$115m



TED ELLIOTT & TERRY ROSSIO
\$3.42 BILLION

Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End, May 2007, \$961m / *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, July 2006, \$1.07 billion / *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, July 2003, \$654m / *Shrek*, May 2001, \$484m / *The Mask of Zorro*, July 1998, \$250m



ROBERTO ORCI & ALEX KURTZMAN
\$2.49 BILLION

Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen, June 2009, \$836m / *Star Trek*, May 2009, \$386m / *Transformers*, July 2007, \$710m / *Mission: Impossible III*, May 2006, \$398m / *The Island*, July 2005, \$163m



AKIVA GOLDSMAN
\$2.32 BILLION

Angels & Demons, May 2009, \$486m / *The Da Vinci Code*, May 2006, \$758m / *I, Robot*, July 2004, \$347m / *Batman and Robin*, June 1997, \$238m / *A Time to Kill*, July 1996, \$152m / *Batman Forever*, June 1995, \$337m



BOB PETERSON
\$2.22 BILLION

Up, May 2009, \$731m / *Ratatouille*, June 2007, \$624m / *Finding Nemo*, May 2003, \$868m



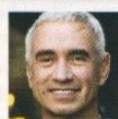
CHRISTOPHER NOLAN
\$2.2 BILLION

Inception, July 2010, \$826m / *The Dark Knight*, July 2008, \$1 billion / *Batman Begins*, June 2005, \$373m



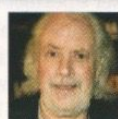
M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN
\$1.82 BILLION

The Last Airbender, July 2010, \$320m / *The Happening*, June 2008, \$163m / *The Village*, July 2004, \$257m / *Signs*, August 2002, \$408m / *The Sixth Sense*, August 1999, \$673m



ROLAND EMMERICH
\$1.74 BILLION

The Day After Tomorrow, May 2004, \$544m / *Godzilla*, May 1998, \$379m / *Independence Day*, July 1996, \$817m



ROBERT TOWNE
\$1.43 BILLION

Mission: Impossible II, May 2000, \$546m / *Mission: Impossible*, May 1996, \$458m / *The Firm*, July 1993, \$270m / *Days of Thunder*, June 1990, \$158m