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film

Remaking Paramount by the Seat of His Pants

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LOS ANGELES

PROSPECTIVE blockbusters are not usually built this way.

Rob Moore, the executive who oversees Paramount Pictures' marketing and distribution operations, had an open date in his movie schedule. He had just watched a little step-dancing film called "[Stomp the Yard](#)" clean up over last year's [Martin Luther King's](#) Birthday weekend, and he figured his company could do the same if it had some cheap popcorn fare ready for the holiday in 2008.

[J. J. Abrams](#), meanwhile, had a theory. Best known as one of the creators of the television series "[Lost](#)," Mr. Abrams figured he could make the modern-day equivalent of "[Godzilla](#)" for \$25 million or less, if he hired a bunch of no-name actors, shot much of the movie with a single \$1,500 hand-held camera and threw the rest of his cash into special effects.

And [Brad Grey](#), chairman of the Paramount Motion Picture Group, had an itch. Imagining himself following in the footsteps of the movie moguls [Lew Wasserman](#) and Sidney Sheinberg in the days when they took a budding [Steven Spielberg](#) and his fledgling company under their wing at Universal, Mr. Grey remembers telling Mr. Abrams: "I'm going to be Sid and Lew, and

you're going to be Steven.”

And so [“Cloverfield,”](#) a monster movie for the YouTube generation that is set for release on Friday, was born.

Three years into Mr. Grey's turbulent tenure, this seemingly seat-of-the-pants enterprise is emblematic of the creative imprimatur he is stamping on Paramount, the storied studio of [“The Ten Commandments”](#) and the “Godfather” saga, which had calcified in recent years into a conservative operation that focused more on splitting risk with partners than swinging for the fences.

Mr. Grey, a former talent manager whose producer credits include “The Sopranos,” brought with him an outsider's creative impulsiveness, a slightly goofy grandeur more reminiscent of the classic movie mogul than today's buttoned-down studio executive. And if “Cloverfield” turns into Paramount's first full-blown home-grown crowd-pleaser from the Grey regime, it may also mean things are finally beginning to work the way they're supposed to at the lot on Melrose Avenue.

This year's movie slate is packed with assertively commercial prospects and at least a couple of potentially interesting films, even factoring out contributions from DreamWorks, which was acquired under Mr. Grey and whose principals, Mr. Spielberg and [David Geffen](#), are now making noises about leaving. The slate includes a summertime comedy from [Mike Myers](#) called [“The Love Guru,”](#) a long-awaited [“Indiana Jones”](#) sequel from Mr. Spielberg and a Marvel Enterprises contribution called [“Iron Man.”](#) Later in the year comes a [“Star Trek”](#) film from Mr. Abrams and big-star Oscar fodder in [“The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,”](#) which features an effects-doctored [Brad Pitt](#) in the director [David Fincher](#)'s version of an [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#)

story about a man who ages backward.

“With a little good fortune we’ll probably have the biggest summer in the history of Paramount Pictures,” Mr. Grey said in a recent interview over the glass-topped table in his private conference room.

Getting to this point was the hard part.

Since taking over from the movie veterans [Sherry Lansing](#) and Jonathan Dolgen in early 2005, Mr. Grey has sent the studio on a ride that turned queasy even by Hollywood standards. By Mr. Grey’s own count 1,000 of about 3,000 employees have been shown the door, including his handpicked chief lieutenant. Big movies like [“Beowulf”](#) and [“Mission: Impossible III”](#) have fallen short. Mr. Geffen and Mr. Spielberg complained about the assignment of due credit for their contributions to Paramount’s box-office success. And Mr. Grey’s ultimate boss, [Sumner M. Redstone](#), the aging chairman of [Viacom](#), unceremoniously bounced the studio’s biggest resident star, [Tom Cruise](#), and administered a public spanking in a newspaper article that undercut Mr. Grey’s authority around town.

In discussing the Cruise brouhaha Mr. Grey flexed his skills at talent management and corporate self-preservation. Though he effusively praised Mr. Cruise, he said that in retrospect he thought Mr. Redstone had been right to decline an expensive renewal of his production deal.

“It’s not the form I would have announced it in. But the judgment, he and I were in sync on,” Mr. Grey said of his boss and the Cruise decision.

If the studio’s legions are to remain in sync with their own boss, they will spend the next several weeks coming to terms with yet another management shuffle, which took place over the holidays. In the new alignment John Leshner, previously president of the Paramount Vantage

specialty unit, leapfrogs to a new position in charge of the company's worldwide motion picture group. He has responsibility for all film units except DreamWorks and will remain deeply involved with Paramount Vantage, where his old lieutenant Nick Meyer will be in charge.

Brad Weston, who had become production president of the studio with the earlier departure of Gail Berman — a Grey appointee who lasted less than two years — now reports to Mr. Leshner. Mr. Moore becomes vice chairman of the studio, while Frederick Huntsberry remains chief operating officer, overseeing the lot, finance and administration, completing the inner circle on which Mr. Grey expects to rely.

Asked if he felt management was finally where he wanted it, Mr. Grey said, "Yeah, I do."

Just turned 50, the Bronx-born Mr. Grey is compact and soft-spoken, with close-trimmed hair now flecked with gray. His top lieutenants say that he delegates power but never quite steps out of the process. At the meeting last spring at which "Cloverfield" got the go-ahead — a typical encounter, Mr. Weston said — Mr. Grey voiced initial alarm at the idea of having Matt Reeves — a relatively untested filmmaker who had directed ["The Pallbearer"](#) for Miramax and had been an executive producer, with Mr. Abrams, of the television series ["Felicity"](#) — as director.

"What do you mean, you're going to greenlight the movie with a kid named Matt directing?" Mr. Grey said, according to Mr. Weston. Yet with just a 65-page "scriptment" (more than a treatment, less than a script) laying out a film about a bunch of friends who happen to capture on camera the utter destruction of New York by a monster, he went with Mr. Weston's judgment, hedged by Mr. Abrams's assurance that he would be closely involved with the film.

"I was stunned," Mr. Reeves said of the speed with which "Cloverfield" got rolling.

Strategically Mr. Grey's newly shuffled inner council is supposed to converge on film projects early, as with the unconventional "Cloverfield," contributing thoughts about distribution, financing or marketing even as a script is taking shape.

In personal terms Mr. Leshner, a former talent agent, clearly has a special relationship with the chairman, based on common outlook and experience. "John and I are very, very similar," Mr. Grey said. "We seem to share very similar interests and tastes." Oddly enough, their tastes are probably best characterized not by a Paramount film but by Warner Brothers' big-star, high-octane project "[The Departed](#)," in which both were involved before joining Paramount.

In the first years of the new regime those interests skewed the specialty division toward pictures that were often bold in vision — including the Oscar-nominated "[Babel](#)," from [Alejandro González Iñárritu](#), a former client of Mr. Leshner's — but relatively costly in the world of art-house films and of limited commercial potential. This year Mr. Leshner's division is in the awards race with a pair of movies it shares with Miramax, "[There Will Be Blood](#)" and "[No Country for Old Men](#)," along with "[Into the Wild](#)," "[Margot at the Wedding](#)" and "[The Kite Runner](#)," the last of which comes from DreamWorks. But so far only "No Country," distributed in the United States by Miramax, has been a box-office success, and "[Margot](#)" and "The Kite Runner" have been major disappointments.

Asked whether Paramount Vantage was profitable, Mr. Leshner neatly deflected the question, replying, "We're on our way to making money."

If so, movement toward the black will probably be helped along by a quiet shift in the studio's mix over the last year. Mr. Leshner has been larding the Paramount Vantage schedule with lower-brow films that might seem more at home at [Sony](#)'s highly successful Screen Gems

division.

“It was always my idea to go a little fancy, uptown, then take it a bit more retail,” Mr. Leshner said. The retail side next year includes comedies like [“The Foot Fist Way”](#) and [“Son of Rambow,”](#) horror films like [“The Eye”](#) and [“Carriers,”](#) and an urban dance picture, [“How She Move,”](#) from Viacom’s MTV Films division.

The last points toward Mr. Grey’s likely next step at Paramount. On his way to a senior management retreat in Barbados, [Philippe P. Dauman](#), Viacom’s chief executive, said he expected Paramount and Mr. Grey in the next year to “focus on our brands” by cultivating more from the film divisions associated with its cable networks. (That promise has been on the table since Mr. Grey joined the company.) In the near term Mr. Grey expects to get several movies a year from [MTV](#) and from Nickelodeon, which this year contributed [“The Spiderwick Chronicles,”](#) a fantasy set for release in February. The idea, he said, is to take advantage of the cable channels’ enormous selling power around the world at a time when advertising costs can easily exceed the production budget on lower- and middle-level movies.

A great unspoken, of course, is that Viacom’s in-house brands are becoming a hedge against the possible loss of the creative powers behind DreamWorks. Paramount’s first-place finish in the 2007 domestic box-office race among the major studios — it landed in the basement three years ago — was due in large part to DreamWorks films like [“Transformers.”](#) And the departures of Mr. Geffen and Mr. Spielberg, who have made clear that they may seek a new home next year, would permit others to leave, notably Stacey Snider, who is currently chief executive of the DreamWorks unit.

When referring to Mr. Spielberg, Mr. Grey is careful to repeat that he is “one of the great filmmakers of our time, and has come to be a friend, and I have nothing but admiration and

respect for the entire DreamWorks team.”

Yet he also makes clear that Paramount has purchased not just DreamWorks’ library but also the many development projects it accumulated over the years, many of them as possible directorial projects for Mr. Spielberg.

“We will be in business with Steven,” Mr. Grey said. But, he added, “there is no question as to who owns the assets of the company.”

Mr. Grey cited the acquisition of DreamWorks as his best move since taking charge of Paramount. Of missteps, he said: “Oh, God, I’ve made many mistakes. But none I regret.”

This self-confidence is also reflected in Mr. Grey’s rather grand sense of mission, perhaps the mark of a television outsider who is still in awe of having been admitted to the hallowed halls of moviedom. Not only does he revere Mr. Wasserman and Mr. Sheinberg, towering figures in Hollywood history who made Universal a dominant force by staking its destiny on blockbusters like [“Jaws,”](#) [“E.T: The Extraterrestrial”](#) and [“Jurassic Park,”](#) all from Mr. Spielberg; he also speaks of Paramount’s glory days in the late 1960s and early 1970s under [Robert Evans](#), when films like [“Rosemary’s Baby,”](#) [“Love Story”](#) and [“Chinatown”](#) helped restore the studio’s critical and financial fortunes. Leaving a similar legacy — even at a time when studios are mere cogs in the engines of multinational entertainment conglomerates — is clearly on his mind.

“The only thing you can hope for in one of these jobs,” he said, “is that when the next guy’s sitting here, they look back and say: ‘Wow, that was a great period. They made some extraordinary pictures.’”

