

# With a Little Help, Bad Can Be Made Good Enough



**N**O PRODUCER, FROM DICK ZANUCK to Don Simpson, ever woke up and said, “Let’s make a really bad movie today!” Even Ed Wood and Roger Corman set out to make, well, art—though it could be argued that “Plan 9 from Outer Space” and “Creature from the Haunted Sea” betrayed them.

A month or so after Walt Disney Studios Chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg seduced me into leaving journalism to become a vice president of production for the studio, I found out how easily bad movies can happen. I was assigned my first big project, “Cocktail,” based on the satiric novel by Woody Gould. The story of a bartender who takes on the airs of an ’80s investment banker, “Cocktail” had been kicking around Hollywood for years, and Disney exec Ricardo Mestres had picked it up.

The first draft of the script I read was brilliant, capturing all of Gould’s sardonic wit while paring the novel for the screen. Still, a great script doesn’t guarantee anything in this business. It has to pass muster with the big boss.

Katzenberg—and I say this knowing that I owe my motion picture career to him—is not a subtle man. And if there’s one thing a black comedy such as “Cocktail” needs in order to work (and, trust me, few do work), it’s subtlety.

Here’s how the staff meeting went back in 1987:

Katzenberg: “OK, Ricardo, why is this funny?”

Ricardo: “Trust me Jeffrey, I know Wall Street—it is!”

Katzenberg: “I don’t get the joke. If I’m not laughing, you damn well better get a big star to play the lead!”

At that point, Ricardo and I tried to figure out who could play the nefarious character. At that time, Disney had three “Toms” under contract—Cruise, Selleck and Hanks. Hanks would have been perfect in the part. But for some reason Ricardo and I buzzed Tom Cruise instead. Cruise, fresh off “Top Gun,” had never done comedy. No matter. He said yes—and things quickly spiraled out of control.

Because Cruise was now the biggest movie star in the world, Ricardo and I suddenly had a new partner: Mega-agency CAA. And the folks there weren’t going to give us their top talent for nothing.

The only time Cruise had available was in November, and the only CAA director available that month was Roger Donaldson, hot off “No Way Out,” starring Kevin Costner. So now we had a black comedy, the hardest genre to pull off, with a star who wasn’t funny, directed by a director who wasn’t funny. In fact, Donaldson was a New Zealander, which meant he didn’t get the joke at all.

By the time the crew returned from shooting in Jamaica, the whole picture was a mishmash of Cruise flipping bottles and/or chicks, with nary a laugh in it. Eventually—against our will—Katzenberg saw it.

“I don’t know what you were thinking,” he said, “but I’ll tell you one thing: If it ain’t funny, Cruise better damn

well be sympathetic.” And that’s where all of those elements that open the movie and have nothing to do with the book—the boring stuff showing Cruise home from the Army, trying college, blah, blah, blah—came from. The critics hated that part. But Katzenberg was right: If Cruise wasn’t funny, we at least had to depict him trying to make it the “regular” way, before conning his way to the top.

It worked. Despite being perhaps the worst reviewed movie of 1988, “Cocktail” grossed more than \$150 million. The lesson: With a little massaging, bad could be made good—or at least good enough.

As for my contribution? Late in the process, the executive team was walking out of a marketing meeting when Katzenberg piped up: “All right, ‘Cocktail,’ what’s that mean?” When no one could answer, he decided, “Let’s call it ‘The Bartender.’”

I went back to my office and wrote the memo I’m still proudest of. It was only one line, but I copied everyone at Disney from Michael Eisner to the gardeners: “Would anyone remember Warren Beatty’s ‘Shampoo’ if it had been called ‘The Hairdresser?’”

To Katzenberg’s credit, the title was changed back to “Cocktail.”