

RKO Lives On

Ted Hartley Leads Revival of Historic Studio

"If you can combine making films with building a company, that, to me, is the best of all worlds."

—Ted Hartley, CEO of RKO Pictures

There are few studios that can boast the place in Hollywood history that RKO claims. The pictures made by the legendary studio are among the greatest and most beloved films of all time. From *King Kong* and *Top Hat* to *Citizen Kane* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, RKO's pedigree, to say the least, speaks for itself.

Back in 1990, when Ted Hartley first took the reins as CEO of RKO Pictures, the studio was in some rather dire straits. It had gone from being one of the largest and most successful studios in the world to just barely staying afloat. "The investment bankers had sold whatever they could for cash and they were a production house only making three or four movies at that time," Hartley recalls. "I just felt that a company that had done some of the greatest films of all time and had had some of the most creative people working there shouldn't end. It was part of Hollywood tradition and part of Hollywood's future."

Hartley's respect for RKO and its history made him determined to bring the celebrated company back to its once proud stature. "I was attracted by the history and the glory of the company and the reputation it had for quality...but it's much harder to build a company back up after it has been run down than it is to run it down or in some ways start it from scratch." Hartley and his team, including his wife, actress Dina Merrill, brought new capital to RKO and began to restructure the damaged company. "It took us a while to figure out the business plan, to really understand first of all what we had and, secondly, how we were going to be active again in the industry."

The first few years of the restructuring of RKO Pictures were largely spent assessing and rebuilding the RKO library of films. "Originally, we didn't even know what we had. Files had been sent off to various places and some were destroyed. We had to find all the prints and negatives. We were sending people around the world to processing houses to pull back the physical elements."

While attempting to put the company back together again, they stumbled upon quite an interesting discovery. "In the last, waning days in the '60s and '70s and early '80s, RKO had com-

missioned a number of screenplays for movies that were never made, by Ring Lardner and Orson Welles and Ben Hecht and a number of the famous writers in Hollywood. The screenplays had presumably been lost, but we located them out at UCLA where they had been given, at some point, by the company for safekeeping. So, in addition to the 1,100 films which we have ourselves, we now have an additional 800-plus scripts by some of the most famous writers." One of the scripts by Orson Welles, entitled *Way to Santiago* is currently in development, with Debra Hill (*The Fisher King*) coming on as producing partner.

Under the new structure, RKO Pictures is made up of several divisions, each with a specific function. RKO Producers Circle is slated to produce bigger-budget films in association with other motion picture studios and Hollywood producers. RKO Radio Pictures is intended to produce lower-budget and independent films by up-and-coming talent. They currently have an 11-picture deal with Miramax's Dimension Films, as well as single-picture deals with Fine Line and Lola Films. "The most exciting thing a producer can do is to find new talent and support them. It makes you get up in the morning and want to run to work," declares Hartley.

In addition to reviving RKO Radio Pictures, Hartley and his wife have established the Hartley-Merrill International Screen-writing Award. The best writers from 14 countries around the world are selected to compete every year. The winning scribe is brought to the United States to study writing at the Sundance Screenwriter's Lab and to be introduced to the Hollywood community and help them make contacts with agents so that they can begin getting their stuff read.

Next up for RKO is *Mighty Joe Young*, a remake of their classic 1949 film, which will hit theatres this Christmas via Walt Disney Pictures. "Christmas day, there are going to be a lot of people who will have the opportunity to see one of those great family movies that people will talk about and want their children to see for a long time," Hartley says. The modern-day retelling, directed by Ron Underwood, preserves the heartwarming story while taking full advantage of available moviemaking technology. The film also boasts a score by James Horner, now of *Titanic* fame. "It's the perfect Christmas, holiday movie and something we will all be proud that we made," the RKO chief declares.

Hartley's outlook for the future of RKO is bright. "The trick is to keep making quality movies, to keep the name RKO associated with great movies with great stories and great writers. To bring in new talent in the Radio Pictures development, so that we're a home for people with new ideas and new ways of approaching film. And, in the big-picture division, to tell

some of the great stories and the great classics of all time in a new way, taking advantage of the production values we have now that have never been available before." With Hartley's combination of vision for the future and respect for the past, the RKO legacy appears to be in good hands.

By Tom Bennett



PATCH WORK

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beginnings of it," Shadyac states simply.

Most recently, the blossoming director took on Steve Oedekerk's screenplay of *Patch Adams*, but with one proviso. He told Oedekerk, "I only want to do it with Robin Williams. It screams of Robin Williams. I can't think of another person who I'd like to make this movie with. It's a one-shot thing, Steve. We took our shot and it worked! It got through the screeners and it got to Robin and he loved it."

Tom Shadyac, with three mega hits, couldn't get the script directly into Robin Williams' hands? What was the problem?

"That's why I'm in therapy, my friend," Shadyac jokes. "Self-esteem." Then, more seriously, he explains, "You know, *Liar Liar* hadn't come out. And Robin Williams is booked forever. I didn't think there was even an opportunity for him to read anything. But it got through."

"I think it's an amazing Robin Williams performance," Shadyac continues. "I think it taps into more of who Robin Williams is and his talent than just about anything recently...This gives you both the dramatic and comedic elements of his personality. I describe him as a cross between Groucho and Gandhi. He really cares and he's zen-like, but he's as brilliant comedically as you can imagine."

The buzz on Williams' performance is so strong that, even before the film's opening, there is talk of an Oscar nomination. Shadyac couldn't be more enthusiastic at the prospect, but he is also understandably cautious. "Because the film is funny, I hope that the comedy curse isn't placed on Robin." He notes, "Eddie Murphy was denied Academy Award consideration [for *The Nutty Professor*], and that was as versatile as anything we saw in recent years. I hope someday people will appreciate how difficult it is to be funny."

Taking a break from comedy, Shadyac is contemplating a drama for his next project. "It would be the complete counterpoint to *Ace Ventura*, which was all comedy."

But why not do what you do best?

"Because," declares Shadyac, "there are other aspects to my personality." In the final analysis, he says, "I have to tell stories that move me. If it's a drama that moves me, I'll do it. If it's a comedy that moves me, I'll do that. I want to see if I can go down a different road."



TED HARTLEY