Disney's 'Tracy' Wows 'Em; Beatty Reflects On His Role

by Jim McCullough

BREATHTAKING SUMMER? Will Walt Disney's much-ballyhoed "Dick Tracy" outshoot "Batman" at the summer box office? The jury's still out but the Warner Beatty/Madonna-starring film grossed an estimated $22 million-$25 million at the box office its debut weekend of June 15-17. That falls short of the $40 million opening weekend of "Batman" last summer. The Crusader soared to the $250 million mark for Warner Bros. and signed off last Nov. 15 with a self-through home video bang. Nevertheless, "Tracy" is still the biggest opening in Disney history and despite fierce competition, has sold a shot at becoming back-to-back box office hits by Labor Day.

Moreover, the movie opened to some raves reviews in key markets— including Vincent Canby's in the New York Times and Sheila Beeson in the Los Angeles Times. And besides the megamailing and merchandising machine, the film should also benefit from two accompanying albums. Madonna's "I'm Breathless" Warner Bros. disc at No. 3 in its fourth week on Billboard's Top Pop Albums chart with a solid shot at No. 1, while her single "Causing a Scene" just spent a few weeks atop Billboard's Hot 100 Singles chart. A second single—"Hanky Panky"— has just been released by Sony/Warner Bros. and has just issued a soundtrack.

BAD TRACY: There's no question now that the stakes for summer blockbusters are getting higher. The latest, major studio wrinkle seems to be that even blockbusters need something extra—an "event." Disney set the pace for that by not only staging midnight theatrical showings for T-shirt-ticket wearers (at $12-$20 a pop) around the country but throwing one of the most elaborate and well-covered world premieres and parties in moviedom at the Disney East complex in Orlando, Fla. June 14-15.

Disney was even able to cajole the press-shy Beatty into a wide-ranging, joint press conference with Michael Eisner, chairman and chief executive officer of the Walt Disney Co., and Jeffrey Katzenberg, chairman of the Walt Disney Studios, at the MGM/Disney studio June 15.

Here's a sampling:

Beatty on Madonna: "I could keep you here a long time talking about Madonna as an actress. She's a person of an unlimited imagination, energy, generosity of spirit, and talent as a comedienne, serious actress, singer, dancer, and collaborator. She brings complete professionalism and dedication. She's always on time, enthusiastic about other people, and doesn't take herself too seriously. She should, too. We should all relax and enjoy her because she's a big gift to the entertainment industry."

Eisner on violence: "There's a wave of unbelievably violent films being made all over the world. To make a film against that current is one of the greatest things the film represents."

Beatty on the film: "We were all challenged and broke most rules of conventional film making. We were working without a net. As an actor, the challenge was to play a tree in the middle of a garden where everyone is more interesting than you are. As a director, the challenge was to break all the rules that I've set for myself in the past. I would have never scored, lit, dressed characters, had dancers edit, or acted in this fashion before."

Beatty on the press: "I don't really believe in movie publicity. To go out and talk about a film keeps people from going out and seeing it. But I'm in the minority."

Walt Disney, "I've had more support from Jeffrey Katzenberg and Michael Eisner on this picture than I've ever had on a picture. They are as well-organized a company as I've ever seen. I dislike making a deal with them since they are extremely tough. But once they work with you, it's really remarkable in every phase of production. Disney was the one company that had the courage to go ahead and make a film that was such a big leap in style. The other companies were timid. But Disney's showed that before with 'Rogger Rabbit.' A lot of studios were very timid. In this movie you can look at anything and see a little super-realism or phony. You could call the characters prototypical or stereotypical. You could say it's one editor and one's universal situation after another. Disney got the joke. They got the joke in 'Rogger Rabbit.' I don't know any other company that would have had the guts to step up to that."

Eisner on the film's worldwide appeal: "We never overly think through who's going to go to a movie. Maybe that's wrong. We don't do research. We tend to go with our instincts."

Beatty on Dick Tracy: "I tried wearing makeup. But Tracy's is drawn from two angles. The hell of it is in a movie, you have to turn your head. With makeup I looked like someone else. And Tracy is a stolid character. You've got to try and put a little emotion into it when you're making a movie."