



# Disney comes to town

**CHAT** Lawrence Kaplan of Walt Disney talks to SUDHISH KAMATH about Indian films and the company's tie up with Bollywood

India sells over three-and-a-half billion movie tickets in the world. And, despite this enviable figure, Indian films find it difficult to gross more than \$ 20 million, while other non-English films made around the world manage to gross anywhere between \$ 100 million and \$ 200 million. That is the sort of complexity that makes India a challenging yet promising market for international players.

Having announced four films to be produced independently under the Walt Disney banner, and the merchandise of their first venture, "Roadside Romeo" (their co-production with Yashraj Films) all set to hit the stands, Disney is probably the most aggressive and proactive entrants to the Indian market. Though Disney has been in the international film business since 1991, and slowly set up base in 28 countries in Europe and Latin America, it was only in 2005 when Bob Iger took over as CEO that the studio came up with a serious three-fold objective.

"International expansion, content creation of highest quality, and the pur-

suit of cutting edge technology to deliver films," spells out Lawrence Kaplan, executive vice-president and general manager of Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures International, when we met him at his Burbank office in California.

"It is fair to say that our business model is different from our competitors'. We've empowered each of our general managers to look for local product," he says. He illustrates his point with their 2007 Hong Kong production "The Secret of the Magic Gourd," which received rave reviews, awards, and even a government endorsement that the film should be shown in every elementary school. "We want to reflect and excite consumer taste in India. So, we have

been working on refining stories, working on casting, budgets on films that deliver the core Disney brand values. By Disney brand values, we mean action and adventure. We're looking at action that will propel movies, romance – but nothing sexual in nature, and dialogue that is not inappropriate for family audience. Our brand values fit in with Indian culture," explains Larry.

Disney recently announced two of the four projects under production – Bharat Bala's "The 19th Step" with Kamal Haasan, a film with plenty of martial arts action, and Satyajit Bhatkal's "Yokkomon", a fantasy adventure starring "Taare Zameen Par" whiz-kid Darshheel Safari.

Any adjustments Disney has had to make for the Indian market? "In India, it is about movie stars. You have to accommodate the star, and then there's a chess game. We don't want to participate in the bidding game and increase star salaries. We are not interested in artificially expanding the size of this bubble," says Larry quite firmly.

He has his reasons. "This year, India's biggest hit "Singh is Kinng" made \$ 17 million, "Jaane Tu..." made \$ 13 million, "Jodhaa Akbar" made \$ 15million, and last year, "Taare Zameen Par" made \$ 15 million, "Welcome" made \$ 19 million and "Om Shanti Om" made \$ 22 million. Look at China. A film called "Red Cliff" made \$ 45 million. In Russia, the film "Irony of Fate" makes \$ 50 million. In France, "Welcome to the Sticks" made \$ 190 million; that's \$ 170 million more than any Indian film. For the most active film industry in the world, you get a pretty narrow range.

"It took a long time to come to an agreement with Yashraj Films because it was strange for both sides – so well known and powerful and not used to

working with partners. We are very particular about the films, the development process and haven't partnered on animated films. But, this is really an out-of-the-box idea, and it was the part of the novelty. We were promised that the film we made together would conform to the brand values and that it would have a 'Walt Disney presents' title ... that was a leap of faith."

The big question in our minds, however, is whether "Roadside Romeo" will live up to the animation quality expected out of a Disney banner. "For a film that has a budget very different from other Disney films, the quality is amazing," says Larry, as he plays us a few clips to share his excitement. Within a few moments, we forget all about the animation and can't help but be amused by Saif Ali Khan and the super talented Javed Jaffrey speaking as Romeo and Charlie Anna, the writing and the fun quotient. Maybe, as his Indian colleague, Mahesh Samat, general manager of The Walt Disney Company (India) says: "After "Roadside Romeo", animation in India will never be the same again."



**WE DON'T WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE BIDDING GAME AND INCREASE STAR SALARIES**