

Robert Downey Jr. will receive \$100 million in salary and bonuses to play Dr. Doom for Marvel Studios

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It was reported this week that Robert Downey Jr. would receive \$100 million in salary and bonuses to play Dr. Doom in two upcoming films, *Avengers: Doomsday* and *Avengers: Secret Wars* for Marvel Studios, now owned by Disney.

According to *Variety*, “For Downey, who helped catapult Marvel into a money-printing machine thanks to his turn as Tony Stark in the first *Iron Man* film in 2008, his deal also is filled with perks that include private jet travel, dedicated security and a whole ‘trailer encampment’ for the newly minted Oscar winner.”

Of course, Downey earned his Academy Award in a very different sort of project. He received it for his excellent performance as the scheming and relentlessly vindictive Lewis Strauss, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and a major figure in the US military’s development of nuclear weapons after World War II, in Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer*, an insightful and complex film about the origins of the atomic bomb.

In that film, Downey as Strauss had a number of intriguing pieces of dialogue, bound up with the emergence of the Cold War against the Soviet Union and anti-communist McCarthyism. At one point, contrasting the present situation in the late 1940s or early 1950s with the heady days of Roosevelt’s New Deal, Strauss asserts bluntly, “The world’s changed. Communism threatens our survival.”

“Survival in Washington is about knowing how to get things done,” Strauss-Downey cynically explains to one colleague, and later, extolling his own behind-the-scenes cunning and guile, he gloats “Amateurs seek the sun and get eaten, power stays in the shadows.” Downey managed to convey through his role in *Oppenheimer* certain essential truths about the American elite-philistine type and its boundless, if shortsighted, capacity for self-justification and self-deception in particular.

The immediate situation and the broader history and character of the film industry are not Downey’s responsibility. He has inherited certain conditions. However,

the news of the \$100 million bonanza can only provoke a certain degree of embarrassment and regret. Of course, Downey has done these empty-headed films over a period of time, but he is a gifted actor, and to be reduced to this, identified in the media with a vast heap of dollars and known to the public as nothing more than a cog in “a money-printing machine,” shouldn’t be anyone’s fate.

In addition, *Variety* reported Monday that the Russo brothers, Anthony and Joe, who began their film careers by making an independent film about working class Cleveland, will be paid \$80 million for their directorial efforts on the two *Avengers*’ movies. The publication added that the “Russos’ deal doesn’t include back-end compensation, but it does contain performance escalators that kick in at the \$750 million and \$1 billion thresholds.”

The situation in the film and television industry is very bad, and getting worse, from a number of points of view. The Marvel-Downey deal is one detail of that picture. One is tempted to say, look at Gaza and Ukraine—then look at the entertainment industry.

The Hollywood studios and networks, assisted by the various guilds and unions, are currently attempting to achieve “labor peace” so they can set about destroying thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of jobs, including entire crafts and professions. According to various statistics and studies, this process is already well underway.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other technologies will play their role, but Wall Street and the conglomerates are determined in any case to dramatically reorganize film and television work. Their goal: a far smaller number of productions annually, involving a relative handful of lavishly paid performers, writers and directors (e.g., Downey, the Russos), while wide layers of cast and crew become casualized, low-paid, almost instantly replaceable, at the beck and call of the companies.

The writers’, directors’ and actors’ unions, along with IATSE and the Teamsters, who are part of the status quo and

accept the death grip of the giant firms over creative life, will do nothing to halt or even slow down this process. In this round of negotiations, the union officials have demonstrated their essential function: to wear down and demobilize their members, to dissipate their anger and militancy, and, in the end, to ensure that the studios and networks have their way.

The domination of corporate sharks is fatal for artistic life. The period in which important work could be done in Hollywood despite the profit concerns of studio executives, who for their own purposes (and naturally with their own very limited tastes) had an interest in “quality” filmmaking has passed. The present oligarch-owners of the means of film and television production are only capable of banal, patriotic, bombastic and other kinds of garbage. It’s what they know, and what they are.

A number of very honorable exceptions have appeared before the public in recent years, including *Oppenheimer*, *Succession*, *Tár*, *The Dropout*, *Dopesick* and others, but they seem an endangered species, and there is no guarantee that the present industry upheavals and the immense social and political tensions will not make them more and more difficult to initiate and complete. At the same time, the artists’ general opposition to war, fascism, poverty and capitalism as a system will only grow and seek popular outlets. This must mean a period of convulsive and explosive, and contradictory cultural development.

In terms of the commercial film and television field, there is only an ongoing deterioration. The list of the 100 most successful films at the box office in 2024 includes perhaps two or three serious or even semi-serious works.

The public is desperate to be entertained, in part to divert itself from an ever more ominous global geopolitical situation. In a matter of less than a week, for example, *Deadpool & Wolverine*, the newest superhero film from Marvel, has taken in more than half a billion dollars worldwide.

According to *Screenrant*, a publication that follows the film industry, the movie

boasts the world record for the most-watched trailer in history, and early ticket sales support a positive prognosis for its financial future. Nevertheless, the amount spent on its production necessitates a significant return if it hopes to break even and, preferably, become profitable. ...

The budget for *Deadpool & Wolverine* is reportedly \$200 million, according to *Variety*. ... On top of the budget is a reported marketing spend of \$100 million. That Marvel spent half of the movie's

total budget on marketing is no real surprise given the immense level of publicity that has been seen throughout Spring and Summer 2024.

With the aforementioned figures in mind, *Deadpool & Wolverine* needs to make at least \$400 million. One highly publicized, yet unofficial rule of Hollywood is that a movie needs to double its production budget to break even. ...

Screenrant went on to predict that *Deadpool & Wolverine* would easily surmount the \$400 million figure:

If this projection is accurate, the movie has the potential to do so in the first weekend alone, depending on how much momentum positive reviews bestow between July 26–28. In fact, there are signs that *Deadpool & Wolverine* could become the MCU's [Marvel Cinematic Universe's] next billion-dollar movie.

Opposition to all this, the empty billion-dollar movies, the enormous sums of money wasted, the deliberate effort to benumb wide layers of the population, to keep their focus away from the issues and forces that threaten them, must develop within the film and television industry itself. Whatever the immediate outcome of the various “labor negotiations,” about which the union officials are presently patting themselves on the back, political and cultural eruptions are inevitable. The current situation, artistically, economically, technologically, is untenable.



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