

THE **MARVEL**

OF

THE

MARVEL

UNIVERSE

BY DEVIN LEONARD

HOW KEVIN FEIGE BECAME ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL PRODUCERS IN HOLLYWOOD

Hundreds of fans had been waiting for hours behind the police barricades on Hollywood Boulevard, in front of the El Capitan Theater in Los Angeles. Many of them wore Captain America masks and held replicas of his shield. One by one, the stars of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* arrived. Chris Evans, who plays the hero, emerged from a Chevrolet Tahoe in a three-piece brown suit, waving to the crowd. Scarlett Johansson, who portrays his comrade, the Black Widow, showed up in a tight black skirt and lacy white top. She obliged the paparazzi, putting her hand on her waist, tilting her head back, and smiling. Amid the spectacle, a black SUV pulled up, and out climbed Kevin Feige, president of Marvel Studios, the moviemaking arm of Marvel Entertainment, a division of Walt Disney.

He'd gotten stuck in rush hour traffic on his way to the premiere. "It took me an hour and a half to get here," he sighed. Feige is 40 years old and solidly built, with neatly trimmed red hair. He had on a blazer, a blue shirt, jeans, and a nicer pair of shoes than he wears at the office. He blinked uncomfortably as a photographer took his picture.

Feige is one of the more shrewd and successful studio heads of his generation. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* opens on April 4 and is likely to do better at the box office than *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Marvel's first film about the patriotic superhero, which grossed \$370 million. He produced them both. And he's considering a third. Feige's films aren't groundbreaking—they rely on epic showdowns at major landmarks, set to *Carmina Burana*-style angelic choruses, and the force of computer-generated graphics is strong within them. Still, they feel like a refreshment of the genre, so much so that instead of diminishing returns, Marvel's sequels make progressively more money.

Someone in the crowd saw Feige and started a chant: "Kevin! Kevin! Kevin! Kevin!" Feige looked embarrassed. "You know, usually when people do that, I turn around, and Kevin Spacey's there or Kevin Costner's there," he said. The fans knew who he was. Feige went over to the barricades and autographed their shields, their posters, and their glossy fanzines. "Oh my god, Kevin, take a picture with me," said a young woman with a green camera. Feige posed for the requisite selfie. He didn't want to disappoint the die-hards.

It's been four years since Disney purchased Marvel Entertainment for \$4 billion. At the time, it wasn't hailed as a brilliant move. Disney's stock price sank on news of the deal. Superheroes were hot properties in Hollywood, but Disney was spending billions for a company that had years ago signed away the film rights to its

most popular characters. Sony Pictures controlled Spider-Man. Fox controlled the X-Men, another fan favorite.

All Marvel had left was a cast of lesser costume heroes such as Captain America, whose popularity peaked when he was pummeling Nazis during World War II; Thor, a golden-haired Norse god who spoke in a puzzling Shakespearean dialect; and Ant-Man, a hero who wore a large helmet and could shrink down to the size of an insect. Marvel had surprised skeptics in 2008 with the hit *Iron Man*, but Captain America, not to mention Ant-Man, looked far less bankable.

The Marvel acquisition "was a complete shock," says Jessica Reif Cohen, a longtime media industry analyst at Bank of America Merrill Lynch. She ran into Robert Iger, Disney's chief executive officer, soon after. "This is going to be so much better than people think," Iger assured her. Cohen remained doubtful.

The Winter Soldier will be Marvel's ninth movie in six years. They've all performed well, and some have done phenomenally. *The Avengers* sold \$1.5 billion in tickets globally in 2012, making it the third-highest-grossing movie of all time. All told, Marvel has made consistent hits, which is supposedly impossible in a creative business. "It's almost like we have a built-in GPS system for the storytelling," Iger says.

Or perhaps Iger has a built-in GPS for acquiring studios that can tell stories. Much of Marvel's success can be attributed to Feige. He has a special understanding of comics, fans, superheroes, and narrative. He concedes that Marvel won't recover the film rights to Spider-Man or the X-Men anytime soon but says

Marvel has something more valuable: a universe of thousands of characters it controls entirely. That means Feige can produce an unlimited number of films with interweaving story lines and characters, creating a vast audience for almost any Marvel movie. People might show up for *The Avengers*, meet the Black Widow, and come back for her movie, too. There's a map of films reaching far into the next decade on the wall of Feige's office. "It's like looking through the Hubble telescope. You go, 'What's happening back there? I can sort of see it,'" he laughs. "They printed out a new one recently that went to 2028."

In March, Feige gave me a tour of Marvel Studios at Disney headquarters in Burbank, Calif. The offices are furnished like a college dormitory, with threadbare couches. The hallways are decorated with cardboard superheroes hawking Pizza Hut and Burger King. There's barely enough room in Feige's office for a replica of Thor's hammer. "I encourage you not to pick that up," Feige warns. "It literally weighs maybe 150 pounds. A good way to strain yourself."

Feige walks down the hall and drops in on director James Gunn, who's working on *Guardians of the Galaxy*, about a team of youthful superheroes whose exploits usually take place in outer space. Its members include a ray-gun-wielding raccoon and a powerful humanoid tree, whose voices will be provided by Bradley Cooper and Vin Diesel. It opens on Aug. 1. Gunn is a wiry guy with big glasses and spiky brown hair. Clad in a T-shirt and jeans, he's sitting on a couch in a dark room surrounded by assistants. They're watching a rough, animated

1 The weight of Thor's actual hammer, Mjolnir, is the subject of some debate. Noting that it was forged from a neutron star, astronomer Neil deGrasse Tyson has calculated it should weigh as much as 300 billion elephants. Others contend it was forged in a neutron star, but not of a neutron star. This might potentially reduce its weight by many, many elephants.



Iger, Johansson, Feige



Feige and fans



In his first appearance, the Captain delivers Hitler a knuckle sandwich



Stan Lee in 1988

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: HO CHANG; CHRISTOPHER POLK; GETTY IMAGES FOR DISNEY; PHOTOFEIST

AT 33 YEARS OLD,
FEIGE WAS PUT IN CHARGE
OF HOLLYWOOD'S FIRST MAJOR
INDEPENDENT MOVIE STUDIO
SINCE DREAMWORKS

2 Or is it? Although Doctor Doom, also known as Victor von Doom of Latveria, is often seen on a throne, it is well to remember that the giant-headed supervillain Modok, whose spindly limbs protrude from an immense flying chair, is due for an appearance in a Marvel movie. And it almost goes without saying that Odin's throne is practically a supporting character in the *Thor* series.

version of the film on a big screen on the wall. It helps Gunn visualize certain critical scenes before he shoots them with actors.

Gunn freezes a frame of an imposing-looking villain any serious comic book fan would recognize instantly. He sits on a rocket-powered throne. Feige sees something on the screen that he doesn't like. The evildoer needs to be farther away in the frame so he looks more imperious, he says.

"I don't know," says Gunn. "I think it's going to look cool, man."

"You just don't want him to feel petty in that way," Feige says. "I think it's a fine line." "How do you think it comes off as petty here?" Gunn says.

"He's so damn close," Feige says. "Yeah," concedes Gunn. "I think I'm going to have him floating in space."

Feige is concerned about the throne, too. He points at the base. "Those don't need to be rockets," he says. "Maybe gravity disks?" Feige says he'll check back later.

In the hallway he extracts a pledge not to name the bad guy. "That could not be a bigger spoiler," Feige says.

Feige identifies himself as a Marvel comic fan, but he's a recent convert. Growing up in Westfield, N.J., he was obsessed with movies such as the *Star Wars* trilogy, the Indiana Jones and *Star Trek*

franchises, *Back to the Future*, and the first *RoboCop*. When he read that George Lucas had studied film at the University of Southern California, Feige decided to do the same. After graduating, he worked on three movies for producer Lauren Shuler Donner. The first was *Volcano*, in which lava bubbles up from the La Brea Tar Pits and threatens Los Angeles. "It was my first movie, and we were blowing things up," he says. The second was *You've Got Mail*. He taught Meg Ryan how to use America Online.

The third movie was 2000's *X-Men*, which director Bryan Singer was making for Fox. To better understand the genre, Feige immersed himself in Marvel comics. "I did a much deeper dive than I ever had before," he says. What he discovered was extraordinarily rich. In the 1960s, the writer Stan Lee and a team of artists including Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko transformed Marvel into the nation's leading comic

book publisher by creating a generation of superheroes with complicated inner lives. Spider-Man could scale walls like an insect, but his alter ego, Peter Parker, was bullied in high school and couldn't get a date. In 1966 the *New York Herald Tribune* called Spider-Man "the Raskolnikov of the funnies, a worthy rival to Bellow's Herzog for the Neu-

rotic Hipster championship of our time."

At its peak under Lee, Marvel received 500 fan letters a day. In 1968 it was purchased by Cadence Industries. (Cadence, a true sixties-style conglomerate, also owned a vitamin company and a film processor, which forms the origin tale of Spider-Man chewable vitamins.) Cadence was better at buying random businesses than negotiating with Hollywood and sold the film rights to most of its best-known characters for next to nothing. Financier Ronald Perelman didn't do much better. Five years after he took over Marvel in 1989, the company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

Two years later, Marvel was scooped up by Isaac Perlmutter, founder of close-out specialist Odd Lot Trading, who had wangled himself a stake in Coleco, maker of Cabbage Patch Kids. He merged Marvel with Toy Biz, a company he controlled that made toys based on the comic book publisher's heroes. For years the film studios had been dithering about making the movies they'd paid for. *Spider-Man*, before its 2002 release, had been in development for years. Perlmutter's plan was to drive toy sales by getting the reluctant movie studios to do something with their dormant rights to Marvel's heroes. In the meantime, he taught Marvel a thing or two about watching its budget, which may partially explain its still-threadbare couches.

As Feige consumed stacks of Marvel comics, he wondered why others working on *X-Men* didn't do the same. "I would hear people, other executives, struggling over a character point, or struggling over how to make a connection, or struggling over how to give even surface-level depth to an action scene or to a character," Feige recalls. "I'd be sitting there reading the comics going, 'Look at this. Just do this. This is incredible.'"

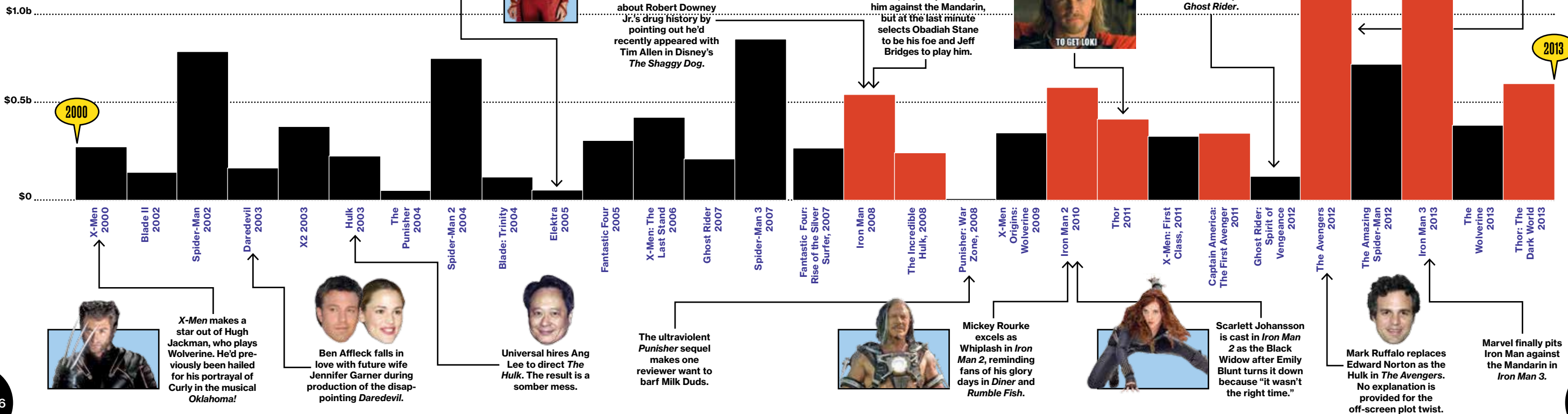
X-Men made \$424 million worldwide. Feige says this is because he worked with Singer to portray the mutants as they had been in the comic books: an anguished ensemble of youthful heroes torn between saving humanity and turning against it as their enemies in the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants did. Avi Arad, head of Marvel's nascent film division, was impressed. He hired Feige the same year to be his second-in-command.

Arad and Feige spent much of their time trying to persuade executives making Marvel movies at Fox, Sony, and New Line not to screw them up by deviating from the original source material. They cut up comics and created guidebooks to get their point across. "I was like a preacher," Arad says. "I would go in and say to these people, 'Look at the comics. You can cut the panels, put them together, and you have a beautiful storyboard.'"

They were pleased with director Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* movies for Sony Pictures. The films did wonders for

WORLDWIDE BOX OFFICE GROSS OF MOVIES BASED ON MARVEL CHARACTERS

■ Marvel Studios ■ Other Studios



sales of Marvel toys. Arad and Feige were less happy with other films. Feige won't name them, but surely they include Fox's much-scorned *Elektra*, a 2005 movie in which Jennifer Garner appears as Marvel's popular ninja-trained assassin. It lost \$44 million, estimates media analyst SNL Kagan. Marvel also faced a larger problem. Its shares rose as movies opened and fell when there was nothing in the theaters. But the company couldn't order Sony to put out the next *Spider-Man* film. Movie release dates would get postponed, and investors would dump Marvel's stock.

Finally, Marvel decided to create its own studio. In 2005 it put up as collateral the film rights to characters it still controlled, such as Captain America and Nick Fury, and got \$525 million in financing from Merrill Lynch. Arad, who had doubts about the strategy, resigned the following year. Feige was named studio chief in 2007. He was 33 years old, and he was in charge of Hollywood's first major independent movie studio since DreamWorks.

Typically, movie studios hire outside producers to make individual films, but Marvel thought that would be the road to ruin. Instead, it formed a six-member creative committee with people steeped in comic book lore. Feige was a member, along with Louis D'Esposito, co-president of Marvel Studios. It also included some

guys who actually made comic books, such as Dan Buckley, president of publishing; Joe Quesada, Marvel's chief creative officer; and the writer Brian Michael Bendis. People in Hollywood sneer about the idea of making movies by committee; it's supposed to result in lifeless products. But it worked for Marvel, in part because the members were willing to go along with Feige on key decisions. "Kevin is essential," says Alan Fine, president of Marvel Entertainment, who oversees the group. "He's the key to how our characters translate into filmed entertainment."

The committee's deliberations sometimes devolved into screaming matches as its members debated what was best for Marvel's characters. One of their arguments was about Captain America. As anybody who had spent much time reading Marvel comics knows, his origin takes place during World War II when an Army doctor gives a skinny recruit named Steve Rogers an injection that turns him into a super-soldier. "It's working!" says the doctor. "There's power surging through those growing muscles.... Millions of cells forming at an incred-

ible speed!" There might have been more Captain Americas, but a Gestapo assassin hiding in the room kills the doctor, shouting, "Death to the dogs of Democracy!"

There were some people at Marvel who feared that setting *Captain America: The First Avenger* in the 1940s would alienate young audiences. They wanted half the movie to take place in today's world. Feige argued that the first film should occur in the past so the audience could understand the psychic dislocation that Captain America experiences 70 years later in *The Winter Soldier*. "Kevin lobbied very hard for that," Quesada says. "I felt strongly about it as well. It was the right thing to do. There is no way that the Steve Rogers you see in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* resonates as much with an audience if you don't see that first movie and really understand where he's coming from."

Despite the shouting, everybody agreed on a fundamental principle: The movies needed to please the hard-core comic book readers first. "Really, you have to start with the loyalists," says Quesada. "If the loyalists reject it, then we feel that everyone is going to reject it." Feige says the success of

3 Captain America's ability to remain about the same physical age in 2014 as he was in 1941 has its source in the comics world, too. The superhero fell out of favor after the war, and his title ceased printing. Lee revived him in 1962 in *The Avengers No. 4*, explaining that the Captain had fallen into the North Atlantic at the end of World War II and spent the next two decades frozen in a block of ice and worshipped by Eskimos, until discovered...by the Sub-Mariner.

Ben Affleck falls in love with future wife Jennifer Garner during production of the disappointing *Daredevil*.

Universal hires Ang Lee to direct *The Hulk*. The result is a somber mess.

The ultraviolent *Punisher* sequel makes one reviewer want to barf Milk Duds.

Mickey Rourke excels as Whiplash in *Iron Man 2*, reminding fans of his glory days in *Diner* and *Rumble Fish*.

Scarlett Johansson is cast in *Iron Man 2* as the Black Widow after Emily Blunt turns it down because "it wasn't the right time."

Mark Ruffalo replaces Edward Norton as the Hulk in *The Avengers*. No explanation is provided for the off-screen plot twist.

Marvel finally pits Iron Man against the Mandarin in *Iron Man 3*.

Feige soothes Marvel executives' concerns about Robert Downey Jr.'s drug history by pointing out he'd recently appeared with Tim Allen in Disney's *The Shaggy Dog*.

Chris Hemsworth and Tom Hiddleston, who play Thor and Loki, inspire a plethora of amusing Internet memes.

Nicolas Cage can't rev up *Ghost Rider*.

Captain America's Chris Evans says he'll quit acting after his Marvel contract expires, but later backtracks.

the first *Iron Man* movie in 2008 proved the process worked. New Line had tried without success to make a movie about the character for years. Feige had seen the scripts. The writers had invariably strayed from the character's origin story as it was first presented in *Tales of Suspense No. 39* in 1963: While designing weapons for the U.S. military in Vietnam, the wealthy industrialist Tony Stark triggers a booby trap, gets a chest full of shrapnel, and is taken prisoner by communist guerrillas. He creates a powerful metal suit both to save his own life and to escape his captors, thus becoming Iron Man.

The screenwriters thought this was too simple. "They said, 'You can't do this. You can't just have a character driving in a convoy and getting blown up by his own land mine,'" Feige recalls. "And we said, 'No, let's just do that.'" Marvel updated the story so it took place in present-day Afghanistan. *Iron Man* made \$585 million globally, and Marvel began work on a sequel.

The following year, Perlmutter summoned Feige to New York for a meeting. He took him across the street to an Au Bon Pain and bought him a cup of coffee.

"What do you think of Disney?" Perlmutter asked.

"I love Disney," Feige replied. "Why are you asking me that?"

"I want you to go meet with somebody."

Robert Iger had been watching Marvel. He'd been named CEO of Disney in 2005 and was revitalizing the company after its troubled years under Michael Eisner.

Where Eisner had been combative, Iger is diplomatic and deferential. He's also enormously ambitious. He has a statue of Winston Churchill in his office. Last year, Iger told an audience that he loved the poem *Invictus* by Henry Ernest Henley and recited his favorite line: "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul." Iger noted that Churchill was an admirer of the poem, too.

Iger had a clear strategy for Disney. He believed the company needed more enduring characters like Mickey Mouse and Sleeping Beauty that could be turned into movies, TV shows, theme park rides, and cruise ship attractions. A movie might make money on its own, but it was in a way an advertisement for everything else.

In 2006, Iger increased the population

4 Marvel risked angering fans when it dropped Tony Stark's beloved butler, Jarvis, from the movie, worrying he was too much like Batman's Alfred. He exists in the films as a disembodied artificial-intelligence system. "It was a pretty good change," says Feige. "I haven't been to fansofjarvis.com necessarily to see what they say, but for the most part that was completely accepted."

GRAPHIC BY BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK. DATA: BOX OFFICE MOJO.

FROM LEFT, TOP: 20TH CENTURY FOX/PHOTOFEEST; JASON LAVERIS/FILMMAGIC/GETTY IMAGES; PARAMOUNT/EVERETT COLLECTION; COLUMBIA PICTURES/PHOTOFEEST; WALT DISNEY STUDIOS MOTION PICTURES/PHOTOFEEST; BOTTOM: TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX/PHOTOFEEST; VINNIE ZUFFANTI/GETTY IMAGES; SYLVAIN GABOURY/FILMMAGIC/GETTY IMAGES; DAVE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES; PARAMOUNT/PHOTOFEEST (2); JASON LAVERIS/FILMMAGIC/GETTY IMAGES

discovering more.” Marvel now says there are more than 8,000. Iger also met Feige and the rest of Marvel’s creative committee. He was smitten. “They live and breathe Marvel full time just like the Pixar folks live and breathe Pixar full time,” says Iger. And then there were the films Marvel had in development. They were interconnected and primed the audience for not just one *Avengers* feature, but also a sequel. “They had a road map that took them well into the future,” Iger says. Marvel would continue to make movies under its old system, but Disney would have final approval. (Disney obtained another seemingly boundless universe of characters and stories in 2012 when Iger negotiated a \$4 billion deal for Lucasfilm, owner of the *Star Wars* franchise.)

After the Marvel purchase closed, there was tension between Marvel and its new owner. Iger says Perlmutter was reluctant to move Marvel’s movie studio from Manhattan Beach, Calif., to Burbank. “Ike didn’t want them on the Disney lot, because he thought that it would change their culture,” Iger says. “He liked lean and mean, and he didn’t think we were lean and mean enough.” Iger put the move off. (Disney adds that Marvel was stuck in a lease at its old office.)

There were also people at Disney who expressed doubts about Marvel’s film strategy. Says Iger: “I remember someone [saying] on the Disney side, ‘Don’t you want to do *Avengers* first, and introduce Thor and Captain America in that, and then if they work bring them out afterward?’” Feige was adamant that this would be a mistake. He wanted audiences to get to know Thor and Captain America on their own before combining them with Iron Man and the Hulk. Disney was persuaded. Feige was relieved. He had enough things to worry about.

Much like the battle over Captain America, there had been disagreement within Marvel about Thor. Some argued that the script for the first Thor film should be more J.R.R. Tolkien than Stan Lee. “There was at least one draft that was written where Thor came to earth. It was earth of the Middle Ages, of the Norse period,” Feige says. He strongly disagreed. He wanted Thor to visit the modern world just as he had in Lee’s comic books. In *The Mighty Thor No. 143*, the golden-haired Asgardian is confounded when New Yorkers treat him like a rock star. Women swoon. A soda jerk is dazzled when Thor enters his establishment. “WOW!” he says. “I never thought the Mighty Thor would come waltzin’ in here to slurp a soda!”

“Even a thunder god may feel the pangs of thirst!” says Thor.

Feige wanted some of the same surrealistically whimsical quality in Marvel’s Thor movie. The contemporary setting would make it easier for audiences to believe that the thunder god could exist alongside other Marvel characters like Iron Man and

“EVEN A THUNDER GOD MAY FEEL THE PANGS OF THIRST!”

—FEIGE FOUGHT TO KEEP SOME OF THE COMICS’ SURREALISTIC WHIMSY IN THE THOR MOVIE

Nick Fury. He won the argument. Much of Thor’s cinematic debut was set in modern New Mexico. When it was released in 2011, *Thor* made \$449 million. Last year a sequel, *Thor: The Dark World*, made \$645 million.

When it was time for Marvel to make *The Avengers*, Feige was nervous. Combining Iron Man, Thor, Captain America, and the Hulk would sell tickets, but making a film with so many superheroes meant more action, more fights, and more mayhem. That may sound splendid to a modern producer, but it might not leave room for the dramatic elements that draw larger and repeat audiences to Marvel films. “I was afraid the movie would just become a bunch of explosions and visual effects,” says Feige.

He wanted the film to explore how the different Avengers responded to each other emotionally. He put the film in the hands of Joss Whedon, director of the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and author of a popular run of X-Men comics. “If you look at what he did with his television work and his Marvel comics, the characters always shine through,” says Feige.

The success of *The Avengers* banished any remaining doubts about Iger’s \$4 billion investment in Marvel. “It was not clear until they did *The Avengers* how big Marvel could be,” says Merrill Lynch’s Cohen, acknowledging her earlier lack of faith. And *The Avengers* didn’t triumph at the box office only because it was a good movie. Until then, most of Marvel’s films had been distributed by Paramount Pictures. Disney threw every division of the company, from theme parks to television to consumer products, behind *The Avengers*. “All Paramount cares about is the distribution fee,” says Iger. “Now that we distribute these movies, it’s not about a fee. It’s not even about box office. It’s about the entire entity doing well, which ultimately lifts the Disney stock.” A sequel,

Avengers: Age of Ultron, is scheduled for release in May 2015. ⁶

Iger would like to replicate the success of *The Avengers* with other Marvel teams. He says Marvel could potentially spin off members of the Guardians of the Galaxy, which include Star-Lord, Gamora, Drax, Groot, and Rocket Raccoon, in their

own features. In November, Disney announced a deal with Netflix to create individual TV shows about Daredevil, Luke Cage, Iron Fist, and Jessica Jones. They will join forces in a fifth series called *The Defenders*. Iger and Alan Horn, chairman of Walt Disney Studios, recently met with the Marvel team to talk about new heroes who will be introduced in *Age of*

Ultron and could be spun off in their own films as well. Iger declines to name them. “The possibilities are endless,” he says.

Iger’s enthusiasm is expected, but do audiences have an appetite for as many as five superhero movies a year? Feige isn’t worried. He says he has a multitude of genres and subgenres to explore to keep audiences from losing interest. If the first Captain America movie was a World War II film, Feige describes *The Winter Soldier* as a political thriller. “The level of action is much more visceral than it has been in our other films,” he promises. The new movies are being produced on the Disney lot. A year ago, Marvel’s lease in Manhattan Beach expired, and the studio moved to Burbank. The old couches came along. Feige likes working at a place where so many famous films were born. He points to a building near his office. “Walt’s office was right up there,” he says. “I love being closer to Disney. When I screen a movie for Bob and Alan, I just walk across the parking lot.” Iger likes having Marvel closer, too. Sometimes he looks out his window and sees a superhero walking by. “It’s kind of fun,” he says. ⁷

⁶ Ultron, also known as “the metal monstrosity” and the “lethal living robot,” is one of the Avengers’ most persistent and dangerous opponents. Although Ultron will appear in the next Avengers film, his creator, Hank Pym, who moonlights as Ant-Man, will not, according to director Whedon.