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# Pascal, Lynton fuel box office fireworks

## **Sony chairs provide a study in contrasts**

By DIANE GARRETT

Nearly four years into their arranged studio marriage, Michael Lynton and Amy Pascal have settled into an easy rhythm that many a wedded couple might envy.

The chair and co-chair of Sony Pictures Entertainment consult each other constantly, finish each other's sentences, pop into each other's offices on a moment's notice and carpool to the Culver City lot whenever their schedules permit. On weekends they watch movies together; their kids are friends.

Opposites in many ways -- she's the impulsive enthusiast with a background that's purely Hollywood; he's more measured and cerebral, with top-brass stints in publishing and the Internet studded into his resume -- they nevertheless respect each other's differences. In Hollywood shorthand, Pascal's the creative and Lynton's the suit, but that shorthand suggests more conflict, and rigid boundaries, than exist for this pair.

"Our mindsets are very complementary," he says during an interview in his office in Columbia's Thalberg Building. "Amy is someone who, at the end of the day, will always make the decision. She has no fear of pulling the trigger," whereas his tendency, Lynton admits, is to avoid spending big bucks and to analyze issues from all angles.

"Amy is someone who walks in here and says, 'You know something, Michael, enough. Now we've got to make a decision -- either 'no,' which is OK, or 'no, no, no we have to do this.'"

Pascal, for her part, quickly came to appreciate Lynton's unobtrusive management style. "What he does, in his own enigmatic, quiet way, is make everybody better -- and he gets enormous pleasure from making people look good," she says.

"But what I'm used to in our business, of course, is people screaming and hollering and firing people and taking credit and wanting to be the only name in the press and all kinds of things," she adds, "and Michael is quite odd in that he doesn't get anything from that stuff."

Turning to him, she says, "I don't know what he does it for, but ... " "I like it," he interjects.

If they starred in a reality show, she would be the gregarious extrovert constantly prodding her bookish partner to loosen up, but without the melodrama.

"Michael naturally wears a suit, and I naturally wear jeans," Pascal says, gesturing to his charcoal grey business attire, then her skinny jeans and pink-sequined shrug ensemble. "That's pretty clear."

"I talk with them about different things," says James Lassiter, Will Smith's production partner at Overbrook Entertainment. "With Michael, it's macro-strategic, and with Amy it's movie specific."

It's a yin and yang that appears to work for the most part, especially when considering Sony's record-setting year at the box office thanks to home runs like "Spider-Man 3" and "Casino Royale," and doubles and triples like "Ghost Rider," "Click" and "Talladega Nights."

Their partnership also represents a microcosm of a team concept at Sony in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Their purview not only includes Columbia Pictures, the storied moniker at the core of Sony's entertainment empire, but also high-concept genre label Screen Gems; New York-based specialty imprint Sony Pictures Classics; Sony Worldwide Acquisition Group; Intl.

Motion Picture Group, committed to local-language productions throughout Europe, Asia and Latin America; and Sony Pictures Animation, as well as home entertainment, new technology and TV production divisions.

It's quite a mouthful, and just viewing the moviemaking operations alone, it would seem there are a lot of cooks in this kitchen. But according to all involved, including producers who are both based on the lot and those who are frequent collaborators, the left hand always knows what the right is doing in the chairman suites, and the mantra of mutual respect affords a surprising degree of autonomy.

### **More than a movie factory**

"It used to be a really small business -- there was no homevideo, no international," Pascal says. "The old moguls knew about picking movies." Nowadays, she points out, toppers must also worry about television, global productions and technology.

"We're huge corporations that have a lot responsibilities and a lot of accountability for a lot of different kinds of people," she observes. "We can't have a company that is run by one kind of personality because one person naturally wouldn't have the ability to do all those things as well as Michael and I can do them."

"It's global and big and complicated -- and it's fast," Lynton adds.

Peter Schlessel, president of Sony Worldwide Acquisition Group, says the pair are "very in step with each other." A longtime associate of Pascal who once headed production for the studio, he now regularly confers with Lynton on Sony's aggressive move into acquisitions like "We Own the Night."

"They both opine on everything together," Schlessel says. "When you talk to one, you're getting the views of both of them."

"From the creative point of view, she's the best person to work with," says "Spider-Man" producer Laura Ziskin. "She's just so smart and in touch with her gut. She responds like the audience -- and that's great

when you're developing a movie."

And Lynton, she says, clearly respects that about Pascal.

Indeed, days before "Superbad's" bow, he was quick to credit Pascal for seeing the possibilities in the studio's raunchy hit with an unusual degree of heart. The film's producer, Judd Apatow, tried to get the picture made for years, but it was Pascal who finally said yes.

Sony was the first studio to jump on the Apatow bandwagon after he produced "Talladega Nights" for the studio.

Now one of Hollywood's hottest comic multitalents, Apatow might have a deal with Universal, where he directed "The 40-Year-Old Virgin" and "Knocked Up," but he has more productions in the Columbia pipeline than anywhere else.

"Michael and Amy have had the courage to take some big risks with (fellow producer) Shauna Robertson and myself, and as a result we have made some very strange movies which have done really well," Apatow says. "They have been great partners who have trusted us, even when there seemed to be no evidence that we deserved that trust."

### **Sir Howard as matchmaker**

It was Sony Corp. of America chair Howard Stringer who played matchmaker between Pascal and Lynton. John Calley had recently stepped down as studio chair, and Sony was looking for a big-picture exec comfortable with new media.

And Lynton was eager for a collaborator in his next post.

"Let me tell you something -- I have always wanted a partner," Lynton says. "I've been in other jobs where I've done it on my own, and to be candid, I found it to be desperately lonely."

"I never wanted to have a partner, but am glad to have one," Pascal interjects.

The biggest knocks on the studio revolve around Sony's willingness to spend big and a reliance on crowdpleasing fare over artistically demanding projects.

Stringer clearly would prefer a balance. He notes the fourth-floor lobby of Sony headquarters has been remade into a showroom for the company's Oscar-winning films, with the walls outside of his office adorned with posters of past Columbia best picture winners like "Kramer vs. Kramer," "Lawrence of Arabia" and "From Here to Eternity."

"The implicit message is that we haven't won any recently," Stringer observes. "I'd like to see prestige films. I think there are some this year, but they're not panning out."

The last time Columbia won a best picture Oscar was for 1987's "The Last Emperor," and the last time it was nominated in the category was more than 10 years ago for 1995's "Sense & Sensibility." (Best picture nominees from 1992 and 2000, "Howard's End" and "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," respectively, were released by the Classics label).

### **Oscar's drawn-out horse race**

More recently, films like "Memoirs of a Geisha," "Closer" and a remake of "All the King's Men" were either plagued by mixed reviews or obscured by the topsy-turvy momentum of Oscar seasons that have become almost as drawn out as presidential campaigns.

"We've lost a lot of money chasing statuettes," says one senior-level executive who preferred anonymity: "We wanna make good movies."

Given the paucity of prestige films slated for release between now and the end of 2007, Columbia appears to be short on contenders for the top categories this year, with costume drama "The Other Boleyn Girl" having been bumped into 2008, and Julie Taymor's Beatles musical "Across the Universe" -- a daring mix of inventive visuals and iconic music -- presenting the studio with a uniquely daunting marketing challenge.

"Anybody who tells you they wouldn't like to have a movie in that (Oscar) game is probably disingenuous," says Matt Tolmach, Columbia Pictures' co-president of production. "But the trap is making that your business plan, because then you're chasing a very small target that you really can't control."

Pascal's defenders say she pushes to broaden the appeal -- and commercial prospects -- of projects, and that sometimes that means spending coin to bring in big stars like Will Smith and Adam Sandler.

"Sometimes they're high rollers, but for the most part it benefits them," Ziskin says. "I don't think it's foolish spending."

"Spider-Man," she concedes, is a very expensive franchise. But the returns have been enormous.

"The risks are very calculated," she adds.

Sony admits it ponied up \$258 million to make "Spider-Man 3" -- the most any studio has ever copped to spending -- and then laid out tens of millions more rolling it out worldwide. The studio launched it with nine premiers around the globe, but it was rewarded handsomely with socko returns approaching \$900 million worldwide.

### **Success is the best revenge**

Nevertheless, the studio has proved willing to balance its slate with lower-priced fare from Columbia and Screen Gems. And it has earned considerable loyalty from the likes of Smith, Sandler and Will Ferrell.

It's certainly hard to argue with the studio's success from a bottom-line perspective. During its fiscal year ended March 31, Sony Pictures Entertainment sales rose almost a third from the previous year to ¥966.3 billion (\$8.3 billion) and operating income jumped more than 50% to \$366.9 million, thanks in great part to greater coin from the film biz.

"Part of doing that job is knowing when to put the foot on the

accelerator," Red Wagon partner Doug Wick says. "It's easy to second-guess success. Part of doing the job is knowing when to spend and when not to."

Besides, one Sony alum says, who's to say the studio would make as much coin pinching every penny?

"If you don't spend a lot, you might not make as much. The economics of this business are funny."