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'Atlas Shrugged' Film Banks on Election Fever

After audiences ignored 'Part I,' a second chance

By DON STEINBERG - October 4, 2012

To a strict bottom-line capitalist, the new movie "Atlas Shrugged Part II" might not look like a model enterprise. "Atlas Shrugged Part I," released last year, cost businessman John Aglialoro about \$25 million (and 19 years) to bring to the screen. Its domestic box-office take was a tepid \$4.6 million. Critics' reviews, arguably, were worse.

Few flops earn sequels. But Mr. Aglialoro, chief executive of exercise-equipment maker Cybex International CYBI -2.26% and a longtime disciple of "Atlas Shrugged" author Ayn Rand, thinks the timing is right. Rebuffed by Hollywood, he and fellow producer Harmon Kaslow, whose horror credits include "Cemetery Gates" and "Boo," have built their own studio, hopeful that a nation embroiled in debate over the distribution of wealth will put "Part II" in the black. The urgency quickened when Mitt Romney named as his running mate another Rand acolyte, Rep. Paul Ryan (though he has soft-pedaled his enthusiasm for her in the campaign). The movie hits theaters Oct. 12.

"Atlas Shrugged," published in 1957, was the last novel by the Russian-born Ms. Rand, who at age 12 saw her father's business confiscated in the Bolshevik Revolution. The 1,100-page book, written in three parts, is a futuristic fable about the dangers of collectivist government. Call it poli-sci-fi. It's set in an America with a faltering economy, misled by bureaucrats who keep devising ways to take money from successful innovators in the name of public good.

With the global economy on the brink of collapse, Dagny Taggart discovers what might be the answer to a mounting energy crisis and races against the clock to prevent the motor of the World from being stopped for good. Video courtesy of Atlas Shrugged Part 2 Productions.

Business leaders, meanwhile, are mysteriously vanishing. It turns out they're going on strike, fed up with supporting the world—hence the title. They decamp to a hidden gulch and pledge to "never live for the sake of another man." The heroine, Dagny Taggart, is desperately trying to save her family's railroad company and discovers possible salvation in a motor that could generate limitless energy by capturing static electricity from the air. But its inventor, John Galt, already has taken his leave.

The polarizing book has been labeled the Bible of Selfishness. It also has inspired millions. Mr. Aglialoro says he was "zapped" when he read "Atlas" in his 20s.

"I thought, 'Wow, gee, you're entitled without guilt to your own life,' " he says. "Benevolence and charity are wonderful things, when they're voluntary and on your terms. But what arrogance to have an entitlement society that expects it. Or to feel that

you've got to 'give back.' I don't know what the hell you took in the first place that you feel you have to give back."

The film adaptation became its own saga. The mercurial Ms. Rand adapted her novel "The Fountainhead" for a King Vidor film starring Gary Cooper in 1949 and hated much of the movie, according to a 2004 biography by Jeffrey Britting. After her death in 1982, repeated efforts to turn her "Atlas" into cinema fizzled. Angelina Jolie was attached; Philadelphia Flyers owner Ed Snider optioned the rights; Randall Wallace ("Braveheart," "Pearl Harbor") wrote a script that covered the opus in a single film. In 1992, Mr. Aglialoro paid \$1 million for a 15-year lease on the film rights, a duration he had to extend.

"I thought it would be a short period of time for investors to come in," he says. "But all these entities couldn't get it done. Ultimately, it's not a movie Hollywood wants to embrace."

Finally made on a modest budget (after huge start-up expenses, production was around \$5.5 million), "Part I" was pounded by critics, who rated it at 11% "fresh," lower than "Showgirls" and "Ishtar," according to RottenTomatoes.com. Viewers, however, scored it at 74%.

"Part II" faced a new setback when Cybex lost a liability lawsuit in 2010 alleging that one of its weight machines had tipped over on a woman, leaving her paralyzed.

"I feel so sorry for her," Mr. Aglialoro says. "She jumped up on there and pulled the machine back on herself while she was stretching." The parties settled for \$19.5 million in February. Cybex stock dropped so low the company faced delisting.

"The lawsuit was crippling," Mr. Aglialoro says. He put just \$5 million into "Part II" but recruited additional investors, allowing Atlas Productions to spend \$10 million on production and \$10 million more on marketing. The new film will open on three times as many screens as the first installment. It's slicker and faster-paced, with a train crash and a jet-plane chase. The lead roles have all been filled by different actors, with Samantha Mathis replacing Taylor Schilling as Taggart. Cameos include Sean Hannity, Grover Norquist and Teller of Penn & Teller (Teller speaks). And in inspired casting, the two top government officials are played by Ray Wise and Paul McCrane, who were murderous hoods together in "RoboCop" and have spent careers portraying creepy villains with oversized foreheads.

The producers showed snippets to supporters of presidential candidate and fervent libertarian Ron Paul at the Republican convention and held screenings at the Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute in Washington.

"I'm making this as a warning," says Mr. Aglialoro. "It's about what happens when heroic producers disappear, and they leave the job of creating prosperity to the moochers and, God forbid, the politicians."

Mr. Kaslow admits that after all their effort, one hurdle remains: "The challenge is that our audience doesn't go to the movies that often."