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Dwarfland: Marketing Disney's folly

Pamela C. O'Brien

In the days leading up to Christmas in 1937, a strange construction project was occurring along Wilshire Boulevard, near the Carthay Circle Theatre in Los Angeles, California. Small cottages with water mills and oversized mushrooms began to materialize. Outside of the theatre large display boards were erected. While passers-by may have been curious, film critics were dismissing it as just another piece of 'Disney's folly', the negative descriptor they had taken to use when discussing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937).¹ By 1937, the film had amassed a budget exceeding 1.5 million dollars, and Hollywood insiders and critics were unsure of whether or not audiences would identify with and embrace animated characters and the full-length story they were telling.² Ward Kimball, one of Disney's key animators, admitted that when he was working on it people would tell him that nobody would sit still for a seven-reel cartoon, because the bright colours would hurt their eyes.³ In fact, Walt Disney and his employees shared these concerns. In an interview after the release of the film, Walt commented, 'We started out gayly, in the fast tempo that is the special technique of short subjects. But that wouldn't do; we soon realized there was danger of wearing out an audience. There was too much going on. A feature-length picture has to deal in personality and character development instead of trying all the time for slapstick and belly-laughs.'⁴

Disney needed to find a way to branch out from short subjects as they were facing changing audiences and changing distribution agreements, which

meant the animated shorts would no longer support the company. Disney knew the way for his company to continue to make a profit with animation was to take advantage of the distribution revenue that only feature-length films could generate. While the idea seems simple in retrospect, neither audiences nor Disney's animators were familiar with animation as a feature film. The challenge that Disney faced was to find a story that would highlight the production techniques that the company was developing while appealing to wide audiences. Audiences already equated the name Walt Disney with family friendly entertainment, and the company was building upon this by emphasizing Disney himself as the embodiment of family values. The stylized signature of the name Walt Disney that has become symbolic of the company and its products is one example of the creation of the Uncle Walt persona. Equally important, Disney needed characters that could tie into the company's increasingly profitable merchandise franchise. The fairy-tale adaptation of *Snow White* was developed to highlight characters that would connect with audiences while supporting broad marketing and branding efforts. This chapter will explore the marketing and merchandising techniques used by Walt Disney to prepare audiences for a feature-length animated film that built upon the expectations that filmgoers already held for Disney products. In addition, the chapter will show how Disney was able to tie the film and its marketing into the sociocultural context of the late 1930s in the United States to improve the success of both the film and its ancillary merchandise.

The years in which the Walt Disney Company was creating *Snow White* were fraught with economic, political and social upheaval. The collapse of the stock market and the resulting panic on the banks from the 1929 Great Depression marked the most difficult economic period in the history of the United States. Only one-quarter of wage-earners were able to find work, and a fourth of the nation's farmers were losing their land. Industry was at a virtual standstill, and the resulting Depression impacted Hollywood. When Disney announced that he was planning to create a feature-length animated film, his rivals declared that he must have bought a sweepstakes ticket. Roy E. Disney, however, in analysing the film's estimated budget, described it more appropriately as 'We've bought the whole damned sweepstakes.'⁵

Consumers were also growing suspicious of business due to the prevalence of misleading or false advertising.⁶ Perhaps this is one reason the PR department at Disney was careful to indicate that both Walt and Roy put all of their profits into improvements for their workers and studio so that they could create better films.⁷ Film quality took on new importance in 1937, as theatres wanted good films to increase audience size even if the films were not from the companies with which the theatres were affiliated.⁸ RKO, Disney's distribution company, was able to use this attitude to their advantage by charging high fees for showing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and the publicity for the film played up the quality of the animation

and the story. For example, Disney indicated in an interview that he would have destroyed the film if he did not think it lived up to the studio's standards. While this does speak to Disney's desire for perfection, it also is a shrewd marketing ploy to begin to convince audiences that a longer animated film is still of high quality.⁹

Disney creates a 'classic'

In the spring of 1934, however, Disney decided on *Snow White* as the company's first feature-length film. Most of the company's animators were against the idea.¹⁰ However, the only way to control the entire box office, not just pieces of it from shorts and PSAs, was through feature films, because even the most successful of the shorts made very little money for the company.¹¹ For example, *Three Little Pigs* (Burt Gillett, 1933), which was the most successful short in terms of bookings in 1934, only earned \$64,000, while it cost \$60,000 to produce. This was because theatres were paying only \$6 a booking for a Mickey Mouse or a *Silly Symphony* short, and most of the extra revenue was being used to make more prints of the shorts to supply the theatres' demand.¹² Disney was growing increasingly frustrated with American theatres, because they did not want to pay commensurate rentals for cartoons, even though cartoons often brought in more people than features.¹³ In 1936, when distributor United Artists insisted on future television rights to Disney's products, Roy approached RKO Radio and received an incredible deal. RKO would underwrite production costs for *Snow White* while taking less than 30% of the gross.¹⁴ Therefore, in May 1937, Disney switched alliances to RKO.¹⁵

As part of the deal, Disney began his tradition of taking audiences behind the scenes of his studio, to show how the films were created in order to heighten anticipation and excitement for the projects. The release of the newsreel, 'Trip through the Hyperion Studio' which showed animators working on *Snow White*, acted as early marketing for the January 1938 release of the film. For the animators, their hard work meant that Disney, for the first time, bought advertising space in trade journals to publicly credit the heretofore anonymous animators and production staff.¹⁶

One audience that was particularly important, but also worrisome, for Disney to reach was the international market. In August 1935, Disney went on a tour of Europe to assess the popularity of his shorts. After this trip, he made the decision to remove most dialogue, while relying on more sight gags.¹⁷ Disney believed that many of these comedy bits would not be accepted by audiences if they were done by human characters. As he points out, 'Portrayal of human sensations by inanimate objects such as steam shovels and rocking-chairs never fails to provoke laughter. Human distress exemplified by animals is sure fire.'¹⁸ By beginning with a familiar

storyline, the fairy tale of *Snow White*, Disney was able to add humorous side characters and anthropomorphized animals to enhance the audiences' connection to the characters without having to rely on dialogue. In addition, Disney's marketing and merchandizing strategy for the film relied heavily on the promotion of these additional characters.

Disney utilized the concept of anthropomorphism, giving non-human characters human traits and emotions, for the development of the personalities of the forest animals and the seven dwarfs. Disney was able to create animal characters that could convey a tremendous amount of emotion without coming across as false or overly done. For example, in *Snow White* audiences can identify with the little blue bird who hits a sour note during its song, thus damping its parent's pride. The animals also push the story forward with no reliance on dialogue. The animals comfort Snow White when she is frightened and lead her to the dwarfs' cottage. They are the ones who do much of the cleaning of the cottage and provide that long sequence with its humour.

The *Los Angeles Times* asked a family, the Millers, to write a review of *Snow White*, and the responses of the family's children captured the strong reaction audience members had to the animals and the dwarfs. Miller's 11-year-old daughter described her favourite part of the movie: 'The things that pulled the whole show together were the dear little animals. Such complete little darlings I could dream of them forever.'¹⁹ Her older sister concurred, explaining: 'Of course, for my money, the Walt Disney animals took top honours. That one little cottontail can convey more meaning with a bounce of his ear, than can Gable, Garbo or Mae West all combined into one uncensored show.'²⁰ This is exactly the effect that Disney hoped for.

The only characters who are able to upstage the animals in *Snow White* are the dwarfs. While the dwarfs in the traditional tale do play an important role in the story, Disney gives each of the dwarfs a name and distinct personality. The dwarfs supply most of the slapstick humour in the film, while also translating emotions to the audience, such as Grumpy showing his softening heart towards Snow White as he waits to get kissed. While Walt Disney expressed some concern that the dwarfs would steal the picture from Snow White, he still chose to make them the centrepiece of the film's marketing campaign, with each dwarf receiving his own advertisement to introduce him to audiences.²¹ Walt himself posed with dolls of the dwarfs for the cover of *Time* magazine, and in a coming attractions promotion for the film introduced each dwarf by name to help audiences understand their characteristic. Disney's highlighting of the presence and personalities of the dwarfs is indicative of the importance of secondary characters to story and merchandising at the expense of the human heroes and heroines.

Disney did, however, play up the character of the evil Queen. In July 1937, one animator sent Walt a memo warning that the Queen was too frightening. In fact, when the film opened in February at New York's Radio

City Music Hall, a story spread that the Queen was so scary that the first few rows of seats had to be reupholstered.²² To address these concerns, Disney removed a scene with the Queen at her cauldron after the film premiered.²³ Overseas, British film censors decided to not allow anyone under the age of 16 to see *Snow White* unless they were accompanied by an adult, because they feared British children would receive nightmares from some of the scenes with the witch.²⁴ Without a universal certificate, RKO estimated they would lose between \$100,000 and 200,000.²⁵ In the end, the British censors were overruled, and the film was shown without any cuts.²⁶ Children in Holland even boycotted a local candy company's *Snow White* chocolate bar until Dutch censors lifted the restrictions on children under 14 being able to see the movie.²⁷

The marketing of *Snow White*

While *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was based on a culturally known fairy tale, Disney still had to get audiences familiar with their version of the story before the movie was released. To this end, *Good Housekeeping* magazine ran a two-part serial of the story, complete with colour pictures, in its November and December 1937 issues. This would coincide with the December premier and the wide release of the film in February. The serial begins with exposition that 'This is the story the new full-length moving picture will portray. Basically, it is the old loved fairy tale, but Snow White must have had a lot of adventures the Brothers Grimm did not tell about, and these Walt Disney's fertile imagination has supplied.'²⁸ The stage was thus set for the fact that the story Disney would be telling is not the same as the one that audiences may know. What is also interesting about the two-part story is that there are many differences between the serialized magazine story and the film, some of which establish important backstory. For example, the magazine indicates that Snow White's father was busy being king and did not have much time to play with his daughter. The King's new wife, the evil Queen, ignored both Snow White and the King, who worked so hard he died. Overall, the article gives the audience important narrative and exposition while also providing a deeper look into many of the characters' motivations and, of course, also beginning the marketing push for the film.

In addition, *Good Housekeeping* is a magazine targeted at homemakers, and Disney was trying to generate adult interest in the film by highlighting the themes of love and jealousy rather than focusing on the animation. Disney needed adults to come on their own or come with their children to earn the highest possible profit. The early marketing strategy worked, as before the film premiered in Los Angeles, the press was already giving it high praise. Disney did not want *Snow White* to be seen as a children's

film. In fact, Walt believed that children were too excitable to have anything produced specifically for their tastes, but he knew that children would be a large part of the market for the film.²⁹ One way to help ensure that children knew the story and were excited for the film was a volume of *Photoplay Studies* about the film that was used in elementary and high schools. Released by Educational and Recreational Guides, Inc, the materials taught students how to understand and appreciate films. As the foreword notes, 'Walt Disney's unique photoplay makes a happy contribution not only to the art of the screen but also to the art of gracious, kindly living.'³⁰ With publications such as these the audience was prepared for the film.

Prior to *Snow White's* opening on 21 December 1937 at the Carthay Circle Theatre, the *Los Angeles Times* announced that Disney had created new stars and that there would be an unusual premiere.³¹ Other articles explained that Disney's own staff had not seen the complete film, and even they were paying \$5 to buy tickets to the premiere.³² Years later, Adriana Caselotti, the actress who voiced Snow White explained that she and the Prince, voiced by Harry Stockwell, were not given tickets and had to sneak into the premier.³³ While the staff may or may not have seen the whole picture, it is certainly clever marketing to say that the company's staff and other celebrities were so excited over the picture that they were spending their own money to see it. All elements for the marketing of *Snow White* were carefully planned to build audience expectation for the film and its merchandise, as Disney could not afford to fail. In the week before the movie premiered, there were numerous articles in the *Los Angeles Times* describing the party that was planned. These articles discussed the celebrities that would be in attendance or the prices people were paying for tickets or the fact that it was standing room days before the premiere.³⁴ A 20 December article describes the premiere thus: 'every seat has been taken and the list of celebrities who purchased \$5 tickets is one of the most formidable ever announced for a Hollywood event'.³⁵ Spectators were promised appearances by Mickey and Minnie, the Seven Dwarfs, and the Disney recording orchestra playing the movie's songs.

The most lavish aspect of the film's premiere, however, occurred outside of the theatre and remained as an attraction to future audiences: Dwarfland (Figure 7.1). Dwarfland was a life-sized recreation of the dwarfs' forest in the parkway from Wilshire Boulevard to the entrance to the Carthay Circle Theatre. In the afternoon and evening, theatregoers could walk through Dwarfland and encounter all of the seven dwarfs. In addition, the entrance to the theatre displayed art work that was used in the creation of the film. These two exhibits were hailed in advertisements as 'educational and fascinating' while also explaining that it was Walt Disney's Christmas present to the viewing public.³⁶ Articles next to the ads further described how many families and parties had made reservations to view the film on Christmas Eve.³⁷ In other words, Disney wanted to make sure that audiences

FIGURE 7.1 Dwarfland.

knew that this was a film for the whole family to be excited about, so much so that they would include it in their seasonal holiday plans.

The advertising for the movie was further enhanced by coverage of the premiere on NBC's Blue Network. The 30-minute broadcast was hosted by Don Wilson and Buddy Twain, and preceded the movie's 9.15 p.m. start. It featured voices from the film and other Disney stars.³⁸ Disney also used radio to advertise the movie through commercials and song rotations. In the week prior to the film's nationwide opening on 13 January, 'Whistle While You Work' was the sixteenth most heavily plugged film song on WEA, WJZ and WABC.³⁹ By the first week in February, when the film was setting attendance records in Los Angeles and New York at Radio City Music Hall, the song moved up to the second most plugged, with 'With a Smile and a Song' and 'Someday my Prince will come' added to the list.⁴⁰ Overall, the premiere was a success. Reporters described the overflowing audience as being enraptured by a film that 'is a triumph of technical craft, disclosing the finest artistic feeling of its impresario and his assistants'⁴¹ According to animator Ward Kimball, everyone in the theatre was crying at the end and gave the film a standing ovation.⁴² When discussing the faults of the film, mostly the reality of the human characters, reviewers still described *Snow White* as being a miraculous victory.⁴³

Disney used this positive publicity from reviewers and even celebrities in later advertisements for *Snow White*. One series of ads in *The Los Angeles Times* showcased the words of prominent reviewers such as Jimmy Fidler, Edwin Schallert and Louella Parsons. They played up the fact that the

movie was not just for children, while in another series of ads, Disney used quotations from celebrities, such as Irving Berlin, Mary Pickford and Harpo Marx, discussing their *Snow White* viewing experiences. Charlie Chaplin commented that 'in dwarf Dopey he [Disney] has created one of the greatest comedians of all times'. The successful premiere of the film would create a great deal of excitement around the film and its well-organized tie-ups, as part of the film's unprecedented and carefully orchestrated marketing campaign.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who has the best merchandise of them all?

The financial life blood of the Walt Disney Company has always been merchandising and licensing, rather than its short- or feature-length films. Just four years after *Steamboat Willie* (Ub Iwerks, 1928) Disney licensed with fifteen manufacturers.⁴⁴ In 1934, over six hundred items based on characters from Disney's short films were sold globally.⁴⁵ These ranged from clothes, books, briefcases, soap, food, chinaware, hot-water bottles, banks, napkins, dairy products, music, balls, dolls and clocks. Disney's products were creating fortunes for themselves and the licensing companies. For example, in just eight weeks, Mickey Mouse watches restored the financial stake of the Ingersoll Watch Company, which allowed them to add 2,700 employees after selling 2,000,000 watches.⁴⁶ In 1935, General Foods distributed 6,000,000 Mickey Mouse cereal bowls as box-top premiums.⁴⁷

From 1932 to 1936, Disney, along with Kay Kamen Ltd, Disney's head of Walt Disney Enterprises, had increased the merchandising phase of Disney's operations by 10,000 per cent. This equates to a turnover of several million dollars a year.⁴⁸ The success of Walt Disney Enterprises can best be seen, however, in the fact that the royalties from its toy and related merchandise sales were what pulled the Walt Disney Company through the bank holiday panic when theatres were being forced to cancel contracts.⁴⁹

Disney clearly established strong merchandising and marketing tactics for its products, and they employed a number of these to heighten interest for *Snow White*. In early 1937, Disney released a trailer for the film that was a tease for the audience and a way of judging interest in the project. In the trailer, Disney did not show any of the animated scenes from the movie, but showed only stills, covers of magazines discussing the film such as *Time* and *Photoplay*. It ended with Walt at his desk introducing the dwarfs by showing their dolls. There are a number of possible reasons for not including any animated footage. One of the most likely is that Disney had been unhappy with some of the early animation, such as refining Snow White's look away from a Betty Boop-style caricature or improving the animation due

to new technology, and threw out a great deal of the early work on the film.⁵⁰ However, in just these few minutes, he was able to position the film as appealing to adults, show that it was being received well by popular press and introduce the early merchandising pieces for the movie.

Merchandising for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was extensive and set a pattern for other films to follow. *Snow White*-related merchandise was, for the first time, available the day that the film premiered. It was also the first time that a feature film's soundtrack was released on phonograph records.⁵¹ Sheet music for the songs was also available for purchase. Additional tie-ups with the film were tremendous. They ranged from cloth and china dolls to puzzles to soap to balloons to metal tea sets to mechanical postcards to cereals to lunch pails to ladies clothing, such as shoes, hats and dresses. There were even *Snow White* hams and bacon.⁵² In addition to being able to buy almost any branded item a person could think of, Disney used giveaways, such as the *Snow White* Jingle Club, as enticements to see the film. If a fan could sing a song from the movie, they would receive a small lapel pin featuring an image of Snow White or one of the dwarfs. Audiences were also able to win free tickets if they solved a puzzle or wrote in a line of a Snow White limerick.⁵³

One of the most involved tie-ups was with Post Toasties cereal boxes. On the back of the boxes children would find images from *Snow White* that they could cut out and stand up to create all the characters and forest scenes. There were also games to play. The copy read, 'There's fun on every box. Ask Mother always to get Post Toasties – the only cereal with these wonderful toys. And be sure to see the movie, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," when it comes to your neighbourhood theatre.' The images on the boxes reinforced the ideas of Snow White's kindness and the 'proper' behaviours of cleaning, cooking and bathing.

Merchandising efforts for *Snow White* were a tremendous success for Disney. In total, 147 concerns were granted licenses to manufacture 2,183 different *Snow White* products. From just the first of January 1938 until 1 May 1938 over \$2,000,000 of *Snow White* toys alone were sold from 117 licensees. In that same time period over \$2,000,000 of *Snow White* handkerchiefs were sold (often sold in packs with a dwarf embroidered on each handkerchief). These figures are impressive, especially considering this was after the holiday buying season.⁵⁴ Overall, Disney's merchandising efforts proved to be a boom not only for its company but also for the companies producing the items. While many rubber plants were closed through 1938 due to the Depression, a rubber company in Akron, OH, that manufactured toy rubber dwarfs was running twenty-four hours a day.⁵⁵ One report exclaimed, '*Snow White* is Disney's first full-length picture. What is going to happen when he really gets into his stride? Industrialized fantasy? It should be industrially fantastic.'⁵⁶ Even vendors who did not have a license to sell Disney paraphernalia were able to profit from the film

by selling coffee and sandwiches to patrons standing in lines waiting to see it.⁵⁷ The publicity that resulted from Disney's gains for other industries was in many ways more significant, although not as extensive, as the company's advertising campaign for the movie.

Advertising the fairest one of all

There were many facets to the advertising campaign for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Not only did Disney need to make people aware of the film, including when and where it was playing, but the company had to get audiences familiar with a new style of animation. One way in which this occurred was to include in advertisements for the film the coverage popular press magazines were giving the movie. For example, Disney included the cover image from *Time* in one of its ads for the film. This ad declares, 'Never before has *Time* paid such lavish tribute to any picture or any producer. Read it ... See ... Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.'⁵⁸ Disney was banking on audience trust in high-profile news publications to draw them into the theatre for a different type of film than they had seen before.

The second aspect of the advertising campaign, and the most involved, was the advertisements Disney created to educate audiences to the story and its characters. While it had become common for a film to have a few different ads over the course of its campaign, Disney created a new ad for each day of the film's initial run in Los Angeles (similar ads were then used in other cities). These ads started on 12 December 1937 and primarily highlighted the Dwarfs, as well as the effort that went into creating the film. The ads also played up the excitement surrounding the film, calling it, 'The most anticipated picture in 20 years', while also indicating that ticket demand was extremely high and advanced purchases were required. One of the more amusing ads indicated that if you could not get Rose Bowl tickets then you should come and see *Snow White*.⁵⁹

Only one advertisement in the early ads showed Snow White or the Queen. This ad, which was one of three theatre posters for the film, was placed on 11 January 1938 and then used more heavily in New York starting 13 January 1938. The ad shows Snow White standing in the centre, but slightly behind, the row of dwarfs and forest animals. Behind Snow White are images of the Queen, the Huntsman and a stylized Prince. Behind that is the castle. This ad and the ones in New York that frame the whole image with larger drawings of the dwarfs indicate who the stars of the film are, namely the dwarfs and the animals. They are the ones that audiences are led to identify with. In addition, Snow White is shown in a curtsy to the dwarfs. This indicates that it is the dwarfs who are the true heroes of the film and deserve Snow White's, and the audience's, gratitude.

The third aspect of the advertising of *Snow White* did not come directly from Disney. During the wide release of the film, which occurred on 15 February 1938, Disney was able to use free advertising rather than conduct a large-scale advertising campaign on their own. Department stores, drug stores, grocery stores, radio stations and newspapers were so eager to tie into the success of the film that they ran large articles or had window displays of the film's merchandise, which was described as being unsurpassed by any picture in recent years.⁶⁰ *The Daily News* in Washington, DC, sent a reporter to New York by plane in order to get an early review of the film.⁶¹ Such a rush on the part of merchants and journalists to tie-in to the film is the reverse of how it often is, where the distributor must work to get companies interested in the tie-ins.⁶² This type of tie-in and limited advertising helped to make the movie a success. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* broke non-holiday opening records in most cities.⁶³ This was helped by the increased ticket prices for juveniles and the extra showings of the film.⁶⁴ The combination of the national and local ad campaigns was described by *Variety* as 'Terrific local campaign of exploitation to keep alive the national publicity'.⁶⁵

What also helped Disney at the time was the lack of other family-oriented films. *Snow White* competed with films such as *Man-Proof* (Richard Thorpe, 1938), the story of a woman still in love with her best friend's husband, and who turned away from men altogether. Released during the same time period was *True Confessions* (Wesley Ruggles, 1937), whose ad shows Carole Lombard and John Barrymore pulling each other's hair with ad copy that discusses Lombard using lies. Such adult themes meant that parents could not bring their children to the theatre with them.

Audiences had become familiar with Disney's shorts that utilized slapstick humour, showed the perseverance and hard work of the hero and always had good triumph over evil. Even Mickey Mouse, if he was ever bad to another character, would be 'punished' by the end of the short. Also, Mickey led a puritanical life: abhorring swearing, tobacco and liquor. Nor was he ever allowed to be cruel or arrogant. These story elements became part of the formula that Disney would employ in his feature films. Disney's extensive marketing and merchandising campaign around *Snow White* highlighted the family-friendly, classic nature of the story, which worked to excite adults and children to the film and its merchandise. At the same time, Walt was continuing the development of his own star image that would be used to market all of his company's products. Disney often is quoted as thanking the people who work on his films, but he also is careful not to give everyone credit. The reason, according to Disney himself, was that there were just too many, but it also works to make his image the one that people associate with the company's products. While sixty-two names are credited at the beginning of *Snow White*, reviewers always focus on Disney's importance in the creative process. As the reviewer for *Variety* states, 'Highest praise must go to Disney himself for collating all the diverse efforts into a conception

of single purpose which bears the mark of one creative imagination.⁶⁶ The result of the star image of Walt Disney is the idea of a friendly Uncle Walt who makes movies for the whole family to enjoy. This image is beneficial for the long-term success of the company and its products.

I'm wishing (I'm wishing) for a success

Walt Disney's image and bankability paid off very quickly in the case of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Even before the film was released, demand was impressive. The William Morris Agency, acting for either itself or an unnamed client, offered Disney \$1 million for the rights to the English showings. Disney turned it down, which was a wise decision.⁶⁷ In the first week of showings at LA's Carthay Circle Theatre, *Snow White* earned \$19,000.⁶⁸ The film would go on to break all previous records for the theatre and be the most successful holiday release up to that time.⁶⁹ At New York's Radio City Music Hall, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* became the first film to play more than three weeks, with grosses increasing each week of its run.⁷⁰ This was helped by the advertising campaign that was sponsored by RKO and the Music Hall. In fifteen months from its wide release date, *Snow White* earned more than \$6,740,000, with an additional \$2,000,000 expected from overseas markets.⁷¹ Not only did *Snow White* save the Disney Company, but the success of the film was a boon to theatres that had been showing films averaging one-third less than *Snow White*.⁷² This helped out theatres struggling from the Depression and bolstered the desire to show other Disney products. The only theatres not helped by Disney, either directly or from spill over of audiences, were vaudeville. These theatres suffered their greatest period of inactivity during *Snow White's* run.⁷³

The international market, which Disney relied on and cultivated, was also crucial to the film's success. *Snow White* was shown in more than forty-one countries and dubbed into twenty languages, including Russian and Arabic.⁷⁴ In a unique marketing move, Disney created custom artwork for each language so that the film flowed seamlessly with the dialogue. For example, in the scene where the dwarfs' names appear on the footboards of their beds, the names were seen in the language of the country that the film was playing.⁷⁵ The effort placed on such changes for each market was well received. In Czechoslovakia, the tax on tickets was removed as a sign of appreciation for dubbing the film into their native language. In France, Disney was allowed exhibition rights for the entire country rather than the normal five theatres in Paris, and ten in outlying provinces. *Snow White* ended up playing for a record-breaking thirty-one weeks in Paris.⁷⁶

Thanks to the box office and merchandising profits of the film, Disney was able to pay off all of their debts and have over \$2 million in the bank just six months after the film's release. This money also allowed Disney to

build a new studio in anticipation of creating a feature-length film every year.⁷⁷ However, the success was not just monetary. Disney was awarded a special Oscar, and the New York Film critics voted on the first ballot to award it a special prize.⁷⁸ The cel showing the vultures getting ready to soar down after the Queen carrying the poison apple was accepted as part of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁷⁹ Disney used the inclusion of his work in the Museum as a way to keep some of his staff busy during the slack season by having them cut up cels and mount and wrap them for sale in the Museum shop where some sold for over \$200.⁸⁰

While *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* began the family-friendly style of animated feature-length films that Walt Disney and his company would perfect in the coming years, its success came in large part from the telling of a good story. This is exactly the reason that fairy tales have brought people together for centuries. The tales contain familiar elements that highlight the values and morals that are dominant during the time the story is told. Or, as one journalist put it when reviewing *Snow White*, the story and its characters represent and reflect society's moral and emotional stance by exposing 'worthwhile themes'.⁸¹ Another reviewer called the changes that Disney made to the Grimms' fairy tale 'necessary modernizations'.⁸² However, the most important lesson learned in the adaptation of *Snow White* to the screen was, perhaps, the studio's participation in consumerism. Audiences seemed not to be bothered by the overt merchandising of the film, but instead eagerly embraced the story, its merchandise and the company. Thus, Disney's folly became 'a thing of beauty and joy forever'.⁸³

Notes

- 1 Anon., 'Mouse & Man', *Time* (27 December 1937): 19.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Walt Disney Productions, 'Making of a Masterpiece: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', *Walt Disney Home* video (1994).
- 4 Paul Harrison, '"Snow White", \$1,600,000 Disney Screen Creation, Now Ready for Public', *Washington Post* (9 January 1938): 1, sect. 6.
- 5 Anon., 'Mouse & Man', *Time* (27 December 1937): 19.
- 6 E. I. Raitt, 'What Can Business Do to Remove Consumer Suspicion?', *Journal of Home Economics* 28 (January 1936): 5.
- 7 Martin Stillwell, 'The Story Behind Snow White's \$10,000,000 Surprise Party', *Liberty* (9 April 1938): 39.
- 8 Douglas Churchill, 'Now Mickey Mouse Enters Art's Temple', *New York Times* (3 June 1934): 12, sect. 6.
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