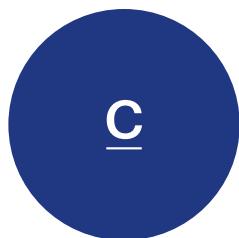


FOX HOPED TO REVIVE ITS FLAILING *FANTASTIC FOUR* FRANCHISE. BUT THE RELEASE, DIRECTOR **JOSH TRANK** FIRED OFF A DEVASTATING TWEET. HERE,

SHOOT WAS A HOT MESS, AND ON THE EVE OF THE FILM'S THE INCENDIARY INSIDE STORY BEHIND THE YEAR'S MOST

FANTASTIC FLAMEOUT



COMIC-BOOK MOVIES tend to be review-proof, but not when the thumbs-down comes from the filmmaker himself. On the night before the Aug. 7 debut of *Fantastic Four*, director Josh Trank (inset above) took to Twitter to declare: "A year ago, I had a fantastic version of this. And it would have received great reviews. You'll probably never see it. That's reality though."

It was deleted minutes later, but the damage was done. Or maybe the damage was merely revealed after months of chaos

and acrimony behind the scenes. Critics lambasted the film (which stars Miles Teller, Kate Mara, Michael B. Jordan, and Jamie Bell), audiences avoided it, and it ended up with a dismal opening weekend of \$25.7 million.

As the fiasco was playing out, *Entertainment Weekly* spoke with nine high-level sources who worked on the film or were close to the principal players, all of whom spoke on condition of anonymity. Surprisingly, their stories tend to match up—although they differ sharply when it comes to blame.

The saga of the making of *Fantastic Four* begins, like many tragedies, as a love story: In 2012, Twentieth Century Fox adored Trank. The then-28-year-old director had just turned a budget of \$12 million into box

office returns of \$126 million for the studio with *Chronicle*, a found-footage drama about high school kids dealing (badly) with newfound superpowers. Doors opened all over Hollywood for the young director, but Fox was eager to keep him in-house, so they offered him a planned reboot of *Fantastic Four*. The third incarnation of these characters on the big screen, however, was not the charm.

By all accounts, Trank dove in with zeal, devising plans that combined playful comic-book elements of the Marvel Comics characters with the darker, almost horrorlike tone that made *Chronicle* so bracing. The director had a healthy relationship with Emma Watts, Fox's president of production, who has a reputation for aggressive handling of filmmakers. But

Trank may have been too enthusiastic, constantly throwing new and bigger ideas into the mix and changing his own mind about major plot points, like the kinds of powers Doctor Doom should possess. Watts turned up her nose at geeky elements, like adding the squad's flying car or comic-relief robot H.E.R.B.I.E. She deemed Trank's ideas too scattered; he felt she wasn't getting it.

Numerous writers were hired to bring structure to the plot. Eventually, Simon Kinberg, who was behind some of the studio's *X-Men* films, was brought in as a producer and he and Trank collaborated on a final script. It was polished by Scott Frank, an Oscar nominee for *Out of Sight*. Watts liked the finished product, but it infuriated Trank, who felt it radically changed

the story. He merged his version and Frank's, angering Watts and delaying things further. Department heads in the crew also grew irritated, awaiting word on which props, sets, and costumes were going to be needed.

As production began, the final budget hovered around \$120 million, about \$30 million less than Trank expected. Team Trank says the director wasn't getting enough money to craft exciting action scenes, including one of the Thing dive-bombing a terrorist camp that was teased in the trailer but cut from the movie. Team Fox says Trank was indecisive and lashed out when choices were made for him.

Trank also became embroiled in a personal psychodrama on location when he feuded with the owner of the house he was renting near the Baton Rouge,

La., shoot. The owner evicted Trank, claiming he and his dogs were destroying the house, but before Trank left he was alleged to have vandalized property in the home as retribution. Fox had to deal with the fallout. The dispute remains unresolved, and every source agrees the house became a massive distraction. The movie with a now-

homeless director then disintegrated completely. On set, Trank was said to be abusive and insulting to the crew and cast. The studio hadn't wanted *Whiplash* star Teller, but Trank had fought for him. Then he ended up almost fighting Teller, who has a reputation for sarcasm and recalcitrance while working. At one point, the conflict nearly became physical, with Trank and Teller chest to chest, daring each other to throw the first punch. Neither did. In another casting dispute, Fox insisted on Mara (*House of Cards*) for the Invisible Woman, Sue Storm, against Trank's wishes, and sources say his interactions with her at times ranged from cold to cruel.

In postproduction, Trank turned in his cut of the movie. That was almost a year ago, and

that's the version he tweeted about loving. Watts and the producing team, which by now included former Fox production chief Hutch Parker, despised it. Kinberg and the other producers scrambled to radically retool the climax.

In the months that followed, Trank continued pushing for his edit and participated in a PR campaign to minimize rumors of discord on set. Few bought it, including Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy, who had hired him in June 2014 to direct a *Star Wars* stand-alone film about Boba Fett for 2018. The director was set to present teaser footage of the movie at the Star Wars Celebration fan convention in April, but that was canceled when Kennedy investigated the *Fantastic Four* chaos and felt too troubled to move forward with him. Reluctantly, Trank agreed to quit.

Those close to Trank claim he was misled and betrayed by Fox, which told him he was a visionary but treated him like a puppet, then mangled the finished product. Others say the conflicts were no different from those faced by any other filmmaker on a big-budget studio film, and Trank's erratic behavior eroded the studio's faith.

Trank was emailing members of the cast just weeks before release, boasting that this version of *Fantastic Four* was better than the majority of superhero films, despite the agonizing production process. Then the deluge of painful reviews rolled in. Whatever delusion or optimism Trank had seemed to fall away. He composed his four-sentence slam of the movie—and pressed the "tweet" button. For *Fantastic Four*, it may as well have been labeled "self-destruct."

—Anthony Breznican



(Clockwise from top) The Thing (Jamie Bell), Kate Mara, Michael B. Jordan, and Miles Teller

TRANK, TELLER, AND MARA: BEN ROTHSTEIN (3)