

## Film Notes

## TRANSFORMERS: REVENGE OF THE FALLEN

DIRECTED BY: MICHAEL BAY

STARRING: SHIA LABEOUF (SAM WITWICKY), MEGAN FOX (MIKAELA BANES), JOSH DUHAMEL (CAPTAIN LENNOX), JOHN TURTURRO (AGENT SIMMONS/JETFIRE), TYRESE GIBSON (SERGEANT EPPS)

RUNNING TIME: 150 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: CURRENTLY SHOWING

When Michael Bay, cinema's reigning champion of vehicular carnage, thinks your idea for an explosive, special-effects-laden blockbuster is lame, you've got problems. A few years ago, Bay, the director of *Armageddon*, *The Rock* and *Bad Boys*, was in his editing room when Steven Spielberg called to offer him a new project: an action movie about giant robots that metamorphose into cars, trucks and planes.

As Bay recalled in a recent interview, "I'm like, 'OK, great, great, great.' And I hung up the phone. And I'm like, 'That sounds like a dumb idea.'"

What helped persuade Bay to do the first *Transformers* movie — which in 2007 took in more than US\$700 million worldwide at the box office, and whose sequel, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, opened on Wednesday — was a visit to the Pawtucket, Rhode Island, headquarters of Hasbro, which creates the Transformers toys.

There Bay, 44, was given a thorough education on the narrative embedded in the 25-year-old toy line: a back story about warring factions of valiant Autobots and nefarious Decepticons, who



Producers Ian Bryce, left, and Lorenzo Di Bonaventura, right, on the set of the 2007 film *Transformers*, directed by Michael Bay.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

bring their battle to Earth from their home planet, Cybertron.

Bay was sold. "I don't consider this a toy," he said. "It's not. To me it's the furthest thing from it. It was about the mythology and that there was a story here."

For Hasbro, this summer will see not one but two of its most lucrative properties spun into big-budget movies: the *Transformers* sequel will be followed on Aug. 7 by a live-action adaptation of its G.I. Joe toys, called *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra*.

The pair of films is the payoff of a strategy that the toy company has been cultivating for nearly a decade: infusing movie-friendly story lines into its popular playthings and teaching Hollywood that these stories can be translated to cinema screens. It's an approach that many other toy makers are also taking.

As fans and collectors know, the Hasbro toys have histories that stretch back for decades. The original G.I. Joe, a 30cm-tall soldier known as "America's moveable fighting man," was introduced by Hasbro in 1964. After the Vietnam War, Joe's connection to the US military was played down, and in 1982 the soldier was re-commissioned as a pocket-size special missions force of numerous agents. The Joe team was also given a nemesis, Cobra, a ruthless terrorist organization.

Two years later, Hasbro imported a series of action figures created by Japanese toy company Takara, consisting of robots that disguise themselves as vehicles and other technology, calling them Transformers.

The G.I. Joe and Transformers

toys, and their comic book and cartoon spin-offs, dominated the marketplace in the 1980s. But in the 1990s their popularity faded, as children turned their attention to newer phenomena like Pokemon and Mighty Morphin Power Rangers.

The revitalization of the Transformers and G.I. Joe franchises began this decade under Hasbro's chief executive, Brian Goldner.

When Goldner, 45, joined



BY DAVE ITZKOFF  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

## The movie industry's new plaything

*The success of Hasbro's Transformers on the big screen opens the door for other toys to make the leap from playpen to Hollywood*

Hasbro in 2000, the company was largely focused on Pokemon imitators and toys licensed from movies. The Transformers had become robots that turned into wild beasts, and new G.I. Joe figures had been phased out in favor of replicas of the vintage 1960s dolls.

"We had relegated these brands to an experience that was limited to the playroom floor or the kitchen table," Goldner said. "The history of those brands was much



Autobot leader Optimus Prime as a cinematic "leading man," above, and as a toy, left. Below: The Baroness, a character from Hasbro's G.I. Joe toyline. PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



a lot of interesting back story and interrelationships."

Assembling the *Transformers* creative team took more convincing. Like Bay, the screenwriters Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman (*Star Trek*) were reluctant to be involved. "There's no win in a screenwriter for this," Orci said. "It's going to be a giant toy commercial no matter what we do."

But they too were won over by the same weekend-long presentation that had captivated Bay in the summer of 2005.

In their *Transformers* screenplay Orci and Kurtzman tinkered with the origins of the robots and the war that drew them to Earth. But they tried to remain true to the spirit of characters like Optimus Prime, a heroic Transformer who turns into a big-rig truck.

"Optimus was like an Arthurian knight, and he was the noble leader of this resistance force that was fighting against a much stronger foe," Orci said. "That led us to a lot of the key characters that were the most known and loved by Transformers fans."

The worldwide success of the first *Transformers* movie (despite some scathing reviews) ensured that both a *G.I. Joe* movie and two *Transformers* sequels could move forward at Paramount. (The third *Transformers* movie will come out in 2011.)

Hasbro, meanwhile, is continuing to expand its presence in Hollywood. Last year it announced a deal with Universal in which at least four more of its best-known brands, including board games like *Monopoly*, *Battleship* and *Candyland*, would be turned into movies by industry heavyweights like Ridley Scott and Gore Verbinski.

more expensive."

Under Goldner's direction, the Transformers action figures and animation returned in 2002 to the characters and stories introduced in the 1980s. After those toys became successful, Hasbro issued updated versions of its 1980s-era G.I. Joe warriors and their Cobra enemies. The objective, Goldner said, was not only to sell toys, but also to show the film industry that, cinematically speaking, they were no different from Spider-Man or Batman.

In 2003, Goldner learned that the film producer Lorenzo di Bonaventura was developing an action movie called *The Last Soldier* and believed that the project could be adapted into a G.I. Joe film. Instead Di Bonaventura, a former Warner Brothers executive who had worked with Hasbro on toys licensed from its Batman, Harry Potter and Scooby-Doo franchises, saw a potential film in G.I. Joe's roster of stylized soldiers with code names like Duke, Ripcord and Heavy Duty.

The series "never really killed off any characters," Di Bonaventura said, "so there was