

The Financing of *Clue*

Clue is a 1985 film directed by Jonathan Lynn. Much like the mystery of who killed Mr. Boddy in the film, the financing of *Clue* is a complicated story of production hell and struggling for funding. Though the overall budget seems to be contested, it is known that the set for Mr. Boddy's mansion alone cost \$1 million to construct out of an \$8 million budget (Vary). The Wikipedia for the film states that the budget was \$15 million, but there were no corroborating accounts of this number—\$8 million is the only figure, which came from an interview with an actor from the movie. That figure will then be the number used going forward. While \$8 million may be a lowball estimation of how much *Clue* cost to make, that is still a very small budget for a Hollywood film. Like seen with *Birdman*, a small budget does not always mean that it was easier to fund, however, the history of *Clue* seems to be as complicated as its three endings, ultimately leading to a flop.

The idea for the film started with Debra Hill in 1979—and it took six years to come to fruition. She had just come off of her wildly successful film *Halloween* in which she was also a producer (Harmetz). The board game was the inspiration for the film which meant that Parker Brothers, who own the copyright for the game, had to allow for the film. Hill approached Paramount with the idea for the film, but was turned down. She then took the film to Guber-Peters Production to get development money from “Ned Tanen at Universal. When Mr. Tanen left his job as president of Universal Pictures in 1982, [*Clue*] went into limbo. Four months ago, Mr. Tanen became president of Paramount's motion-picture division, and [*Clue*] came home to roost” (Harmetz). This shuffling of Tanen led to both Guber-Peters Productions and Paramount having a hand in the financing of the film, with the copyright ultimately going to

Paramount as seen in the credits of the film. Gruber-Peter Productions was founded by Peter Guber and Jon Peters in 1983 and is currently owned by Sony (“The Guber-Peters Entertainment Company”). Despite this, Sony does not have any distribution rights to *Clue* (*Clue*, IMDb). After agreeing to work on the film, Peter Gruber began working with Debra Hill to look for a director—they eventually settled on Jonathan Lynn because he was willing to work with pre-made characters and other restrictions of adapting the board game (Vary).

Around the time of *Clue*'s creation, Peter Guber again joined with Jon Peters to found another company under Polygram Record Labels named Polygram Filmed Entertainment (“PolyGram Filmed Entertainment (UK)”). Polygram Filmed Entertainment is listed on IMDb as a production company for *Clue*. Because Peter Gruber and his production company was already involved in the film, his new company followed suit and added Polygram's financial aid to the film. The film division of Polygram produced seven films, but ultimately lost the company \$50 million. Polygram Filmed Entertainment was “deactivated” in 1983 (Townsend). *Clue* was sent into production hell around 1982 (Hermetz), and so it is possible that it was one of the final films that Polygram Filmed Entertainment worked on. This would also explain why Paramount has the complete copyright for the film as Polygram sold off the rights to their library and films in 1985, the same year the *Clue* was released (“Polygram Filmed Entertainment (UK)”).

Peter Gruber introduced Jon Peters to the financing and production of *Clue*. Both Peter Gruber and Jon Peters, in turn, brought in another person who is credited as an executive producer on the film. According to the article “The Crazy Story Of How "Clue" Went From Forgotten Flop To Cult Triumph,” John Landis (director of *Animal House*) was originally invited to direct the film while Jonathan Lynn was only set to write—although Landis did come up with the main premise and the idea for multiple endings. However, it took Lynn so long to write,

Landis had already agreed to direct another film. Because of this Lynn became director and Landis became an executive producer (Vary). Landis, while still having a writing credit on the film, was switched to mostly having a financial role in *Clue* rather than a more direct role as director. The final executive producer listed for *Clue* is George Folsey (*Clue*, IMDb). Folsey frequently worked with Landis in the 1980s and so worked on many of the same films as him (“About George Folsey”). Many of the executive producers (and their companies) who were involved in *Clue* seem to be involved simply by nature of knowing others, which mirrors the sentiment that the entertainment business is about who you know.

As stated in the first paragraph, the supposed budget of *Clue* was \$8 million according to an actor in the film. This is a small budget even in 1985 terms. However, it does not seem that the budget limited the film much as it depended more on the snappy dialogue than special effects like in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The set for the mansion cost \$1 million to construct (Vary). However, a major cost for the film would have to be its cast. Almost everyone in the cast had been big names—and Carrie Fisher had originally been slated to play Miss Scarlet before she had to drop out to go to rehab (Vary). There are not really any comments on how the small budget affected the film, however, it is limited in the sense that the entire film takes place in one location so that other sets did not have to be made nor did they have to get the rights to film anywhere other than the Paramount lots. It is hard to say if the limited locations are because of the tight budget or the format of the script, however.

It took six years to see *Clue* realized, but despite the time and effort put in by everyone who worked on the film, it flopped. *Clue* had a wide release, finding its way into 1,006 theaters across North America. In its opening, it made \$2,014,166 (*Clue*, Box Office Mojo). Paramount owned the distribution rights for North America theaters (*Clue*, IMDb). From a personal

anecdote, it seems that *Clue* was viewed frequently at Drive Ins at the time of release as everyone who has mentioned seeing it saw it at one. As of today, *Clue* still has not made back 2.5 times its budget in order to break even as it currently sits at \$14,643,997 worldwide. One interesting thing to note about that number is, despite companies being listed as having international distribution rights for *Clue* on IMDb, the domestic gross is the same as the worldwide gross (*Clue*, Box Office Mojo). It seems that it has not really seen any success outside of the North American market despite having companies in place to distribute it. There is no indication of why this is, however.

At the time of its release, *Clue* was panned pretty heavily. Roger Ebert stated, “Fun, I must say, is in short supply... there is so little genuine wit to be found in *Clue*” (Vary). Many critics also criticized the decision to have three separate endings, but only show one during the theatrical showing (it rotated between all three). According to a LA Times review from 1985, “The best version of [*Clue*] (citywide) is the one you’re not going to get to see. It’s being released with three different endings, but only the version prepared specially for critics offers all of them, one after the other” (Thomas). Horrible critical reviews, coupled with the overwhelming low return, led to *Clue* failing in almost every way at the time of release.

Since its release, however, *Clue* has gained quite the following, becoming a cult classic. Like *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (which shares Tim Curry), *Clue* has shadowcast events where fans perform the film. *Psych* dedicated its 100th episode to the movie, casting several of the actors from the film as a tribute (Vary). With so much attention turning to *Clue* in recent years, there is a possibility for the film to perhaps make more money for Paramount. Although, It does not seem that Paramount is interested in capitalizing on the film’s recent success as they refused

to add special features to the recent Blu-Ray rerelease even though Lynn offered to provide a commentary (Vary).

Clue was a mess of production hell and friendly connections. Unravelling its history reveals how it came to be known as an overall failure to a cult classic, all while never making back even its extremely small budget of \$8 million. Several production companies, some of which have since ceased to exist, worked on the film, mostly through the connections of the executive producers. Overall, *Clue* took many people to make with very little results until a recent resurgence.

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