3/15/24; Hollywood’s still not back

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

DAVID PIERCE (HOST): Once upon a time in Hollywood, things were going pretty well.

SCORING IN <Another Day of Sun – La la Land OST>

DAVID: Think La La Land’s technicolor fantasy. The Golden Age of Streaming. Game of Thrones seasons one through six. But then came the Covid shutdowns, and then before things had time to recover, the writer and actors strikes.

SCORING IN <The Entertainer (Played Bad) - Breakmaster Cylinder>

MARK HARRIS: This was exactly the year, when it was supposed to be full steam ahead. Like, finally, we're back to a full slate. And in that sense, the strike like it could not have been at a worse time. Like any gains at the box office that were made last year, and last year was pretty good, but nowhere near what it was before the pandemic. This year, box office forecasters already know that it's not going to come close to what last year did. There just aren't enough movies to get to that number.

DAVID: Hollywood’s gritty reboot. Coming up on Today, Explained.

[THEME]

DAVID: I’m David Pierce, filling in as host here at Today, Explained. It’s a tough time for the entertainment business. But you might not know if from, say, The Oscars, where the biggest tensions were the imagined ones between two of last year’s biggest movies, Barbie and Oppenheimer.

<CLIP> 2024 OSCARS, Ryan Gosling & Emily Blunt

Gosling: I think i kind of figured out why they called it Barbenheimer and not OppenBarbie.

Blunt: Why?

Gosling: Well, I think you guys are at the tail end of that because you were riding Barbie’s coattails all summer!

MARK HARRIS (ENTERTAINMENT JOURNALIST, HISTORIAN, AUTHOR): Well, you know, the Oscars are always a moment to put the best face on things. And this year the best face was pretty good. But there was in the ceremony a lot of stuff that you didn't hear, of course.

DAVID: This is entertainment journalist Mark Harris. He’s been paying attention to all the moments that don’t get celebrated at places like the Oscars.

SCORING IN <Sadly Here We Are Again (dark, lonely, minimal, drone, repetitive, synth, organ)>

MARK: you didn't hear about the collapse of the superhero franchise market in in 2023, when four DC movies all disappointed…

*<CLIP> CNBC Television, ‘The Flash’ disappoint at box office*

*DC Comics suffered the flop of the flash.*

MARK: and and The Marvels really sort of served as an alarm bell that that the Marvel Universe, really is not infallible and that people are maybe a little tired of this. Tune in for chapter 36, and please make sure you've seen chapters one through 35 first thing. They stayed away from that. They they stayed away from the increasing anger in Hollywood over the wild, disparity between CEO salaries of guys like David Zaslav and Robert Iger who run, discovery, Warner Brothers and Disney and the rank and file.

*<CLIP> YAHOO FINANCE:*

*DAVE BRIGGS, ANCHOR: Nonprofit group, As You Sow, they annually compile a list of the most overpaid CEOs and coming in at number one, David Zaslav, the Warner Brothers boss, his comp package nearly $250 million.*

MARK: They largely stayed away from AI, which is something that some people see as a tool, but many more people see as a threat.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA:*

*ROB REYNOLDS, SENIOR CORRESPONDENT: Union president Fran Drescher told Al Jazeera.*

*FRAN DRESCHER, THE NANNY: We don't want to be replaced by digital images of ourselves, and we don't want big business to think it's okay to think that that is a viable consideration.*

MARK: They did not stay away from the strikes, which were a really big thing in 2023 that shut down the industry for six months, but in a way will be a bigger thing this year in, in the year to come, not just because of the threat of more strikes, which was made very clear in the Oscars, but because the ramifications of those strikes are still being felt in a product shortage and, are going to be felt for a long time.

*<CLIP> JIMMY KIMMEL, OSCARS HOST: This long and difficult work stoppage taught us that this very strange talent of ours, as pretentious and superficial as it can be. At its heart is a union town. It's not just a bunch of heavily botoxed, Hailey Bieber, smoothie drinking, diabetes prescription abusing, gluten sensitive nepo babies…*

MARK: So it's a kind of bleak picture that you might not have gotten from the Oscars.

SCORING OUT

DAVID: It occurs to me, big picture, that you're describing this fundamental rift between, kind of, the people who make and consume and like movies and the people who finance those movies. And there's a lot of talk about cycles in Hollywood, and things get better and things get worse and things change. But is there something fundamentally broken between those two things now that feels new and won't be caused by tech, whether it's the streaming services or AI or some other stuff, does that difference feel new to you right now?

MARK: Yeah, it sort of does. I mean, there's always been something of a disconnect between, you know, the suits and the creatives. Before those two words were even the words that were used to describe those groups. The disconnect was was still there. But one thing that's happened over many, many decades of the history of Hollywood is that the people at the very top, have gotten to the top for reasons that have less and less to do with actual movies.You know, so with every step further away from what it is actually like to make movies, and with every concurrent exponential increase in the salary of those guys at the top, there became less and less of a common language between the people who make movies. And as you said, the people who see movies and loved movies and the people who pay for them. And that's different than, what used to be the case. And it connects to tech because when it comes to something like AI, which writers and actors really feel is an existential threat, Suddenly you have these guys saying, well, no, we don't want to forfeit the possibility that I could write scripts for us instead of human beings doing it."

*<CLIP> JONTERRI GADSON, WRITER AND STRIKE CAPTAIN: Obviously AI can't do what writers and humans can do, but I don't know that they believe that necessarily. So we need to make it clear there needs to be a human writer in charge. And we're not trying to be gig workers, just revising what AI does.*

MARK: I mean, the strikes are over, at least for now. But the anger and maybe even more damaging than the anger, the mistrust really persists.

DAVID: So you mentioned the strikes are over. We're a few months past them at this point, but it still feels like we're very much in the throes of what happened because of the strike. How are you seeing that kind of how would you explain the movie world of today through the lens of the strike?

MARK: Well, I'm seeing it a couple of ways.

SCORING IN <Spooky Scary - No Sound FX Version>

MARK: One is, the big contraction in production, the fact that that, studios and streamers are making less.

*<CLIP> The Big Picture, Bad Box Office*

*Sean: let’s catch up on a busy movie weekend–*

*Amanda: was it? The box office was a historic low.*

MARK: We're in a place now where what would have been unthinkable 20 or 25 years ago, which is weekends with no major new releases now, kind of happens on a fairly regular basis, and there's going to be more of that.

*<CLIP> The Town with Mathew Belloni, Takeaways From 2024's Bleak Box Office Beginning:*

*Belloni: in 2023 there were 124 wide theatrical releases. Meaning they opened in 1000+ theaters. This year there are about 10% fewer. At least according to the schedule today.*

MARK: One thing that's happened is, as the studios rely more and more on franchises and on very expensive movies, they make fewer movies and take fewer gambles overall. So for instance, Dune Part two, which you know, is a movie that people can look to and say, okay, finally, I've got a reason to go back to theaters for the first time since, December.

SCORING OUT

*<CLIP> DUNE Two:*

*Stilgard: Don’t try to impress anyone. Be simple. Be direct. Nothing fancy.*

*<DUNE SCORE RISES AND THE FALLS>*

DAVID: That was my exact moviegoing experience. I went to see you in part two after two, three months of not going to the theater. And I don't think I could name you a movie that came out between maybe Wonka and Dune Part two.

MARK: Right. So you're you're ride or die for Timothee Chalamet.

DAVID: Apparently

MARK: nothing else will do.

DAVID: So it seems.

*<CLIP> Saturday Night Live, Timothee Chalamet Raps*

*Chalamet: cling cling cling, man you capping. Oh! Ah! Cling cling cling cling, ooh you capping!*

DAVID: You also in your piece mentioned two kind of possible different ideas about movies that I thought were really interesting. One is the Barbieheimmer phenomenon, which has never quite been done the same way. And I'm curious what you think we've learned from that about what could work. And the other one is Taylor Swift. For lack of a better word, Taylor Swift will save Hollywood. Can you explain kind of why each of those jumped out to you as a thing and also whether they actually do maybe portend something new and big here?

MARK: Well, the Taylor Swift thing was really interesting to me.

SCORING IN <EAS Music Channel, [Remastered 4K] Out Of The Woods - Taylor Swift - 1989 World Tour 2015>

MARK: It it was the 11th highest grossing movie of last year. I think it made something over $180 million domestically. It bypassed studios altogether to make a distribution deal directly with a theater chain. You know, it it was, I think, a really interesting reminder that there's a generation of people that really wants to go to a movie theater, and if they are going to a movie theater for a concert or something that feels like a party or an actual movie, that may not make that much of a difference to them. And it certainly is not going to make a difference to the theaters that need people to fill their seats.

SCORING FADES OUT

SCORING IN <Dua Lipa - Dance the Night>

MARK: And then Barbieheimmer, you know, is is a really tricky thing because, it, it is sort of the ideal of how studio movies should operate. I mean, you have one movie where it's the most debased possible conceit, like, we're going to make a movie based on a toy

*<CLIP> Barbie*

*Mattel CEO: get in the box you jezebel!*

*Barbie: oh. Okay.*

MARK: and it becomes this giant, popular and critical favorite simply because it's incredibly well executed and incredibly well thought through and has a great creative team.

SCORING FADES OUT SLOWLY AND INTO NEW CLIP

*<CLIP> Oppenheimer*

*Leslie "Dick" Groves: wait are we saying that there’s a chance when we push that button we destroy the world?*

SCORING IN <Trinity - oppenheimer OST>

MARK: And then you have this other movie, Oppenheimer, that is like in the decades old historical tradition of how movies, how movie studios would like to see themselves like we spend real money to allow real filmmakers to take real swings at ambitious subjects. And, you know, once in a long, long, long while, they will pay off with $1 billion worldwide grosser like Oppenheimer. And then you have this magical thing where the two movies actually fueled each other, in a way that neither, universal, which put out Oppenheimer nor Warner Brothers, which for now Barbie had planned for.

SCORING OUT

MARK: How do you duplicate that? I mean, you know, in December, Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom and Wonka both came out and there was no, like, Wonkwaman moment, you know?

DAVID: <laughs>

*<CLIP> WONKA:*

*Willy Wonka: Oh. i don't think i wanna hear that.*

DAVID: As you look forward, you make the case in your piece that, we've been through these kinds of boom and bust cycles in Hollywood before, and even that with a bunch of technological changes over the years, we've had these kinds of feelings where it feels like an existential crisis in Hollywood before. So my question for you is without any of the benefit of history, which will make this obvious where it lands, does this feel like another one of those cycles, or does this feel like we're actually in uncharted territory and everyone has to figure out what to do next?

MARK: Both is the easy answer to that. I do think Hollywood is cyclical, and I think that, we have lived through moments when everyone in Hollywood was saying we're doomed before like that. That is not new. The specific elements that are making people say we're doomed right now are pretty new, and there are a lot more of them than there have been in the past.

SCORING IN <KAPT\_KAPT\_0261\_04301\_Love\_Prayers\_\_Instrumental\_\_APM>

MARK: But I do think that there's some historical evidence to say just because everyone in Hollywood is saying we're doomed, that doesn't mean we're doomed. You know, something is going to come next. I don't think the appetite, if anything, Barbara Hammer shows that the appetite for going out to the movies and seeing stories when the movies are really good is is absolutely undiminished. So it's really possible. It's not, you know, it's not beyond reach to get a zillion people into theaters. But I think studios and streamers are really going to rue the fact that they let the strikes go on for so long as we get deeper into this year.   
  
DAVID: Entertainment journalist Mark Harris. Coming up: the state of movies may be annoying to audiences, but it’s downright painful for the people who make them.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

DAVID: *Today, Explained* is back. I’m David Pierce, filling in as host. Hollywood’s economic challenges are certainly frustrating for audiences, but they’re especially painful for the workers who make the TV shows and movies that are now being produced at a slower pace than before.

DIANE HAITHMAN (SENIOR ENTERTAINMENT CONTRIBUTOR, THE WRAP): Well, in Hollywood, it's all a gig economy. You know, whether you're Steven Spielberg or the cameraman. It's job to job. So when we look at unemployment during a strike, it's people aren't getting those jobs. But does that mean those jobs will be there when they get back? Are they going to be the same jobs each time? It's different. So again, it's always those people who don't have the money to tide them over between projects who are going to feel it.

DAVID: That’s entertainment journalist Diane Haithman, who wrote about about how the strike is especially impacting the non-Spielbergs of the industry – the people often known in the biz as “below-the-line” workers.

DIANE: And you know, it's sounds awful. It sounds like it would be better to be above the line. But it really just means in a certain type of job, the makeup, the hair, the tech crews, all of those people, the Teamsters. And they do get hit, you know, they're the people who all of a sudden they're driving an Uber during a strike.

DAVID: Yeah. How big a employment drop have we seen in these last months? This is the sort of thing that I feel like can sometimes be hard to quantify. Has it been quantified? What do we know about how big a change this has really been?

DIANE: Well, it has been quantified. And one of the things that led me to do this story was receiving a report, the our Otis College of Art and design here does a lot of research into this aspect of what's going on in Hollywood. Now, their estimations during this strike, that employment dropped 17%, and that's a lot.

DAVID: How do numbers like what we're seeing now compare to kind of overall cycles? You've been covering this a while. You've seen kind of booms and busts moments. Is this much worse and much scarier than before? Is this kind of what we see in the cycles? How does this compare?

DIANE: I think what we tend to compare it to is Covid, and how that shut down the industry for months and months. The difference here, and the reason for my kind of looking at what's going on now, is the report basically their big conclusion was this contraction of the industry happened before the strikes, even though there was this temporary drop in employment. Obviously there's going to be during a strike because things are not happening. The sense that but the the industry had already gone through this sea change. So I thought, okay, there we go. But what I was hearing all around me is just people saying, hey, I'm not back to work. Hey, I'm, you know, looking for a job. Hey, I'm working on a low budget video production instead of a movie because that's what's out there right now. And what people told me for this story was, we just have to get used to the fact that we're going to be ramping up again, but not as high. You know, that it had come to this really crazy peak, and there were some younger people in the industry who'd never seen anything else, who couldn't imagine that, okay, we're going to have to go back to what it was like in 2015, 2016, you know, which is good. But it's never going to be that that crazy peak that happened With streaming. You know, the streaming bubble has burst and we're looking somewhat at a little bit of a different Hollywood.

DAVID: So these below the line workers you're talking about and talking to for these stories, what are they doing right now to make up for the loss in work and wages right now while they try to wait this out?

DIANE: Well, I think some are on unemployment. Some are smart people who know that this is a cyclical revenue stream to put some money away. But most of those, the below the line workers, if they're making less, they're probably less likely to be able to put money away. You know, actors are chronically unemployed, right? I mean, that's something that this isn't really new, but those who have nice, neat gigs or were on a series or something like that might have lost that. And we hear horror stories, people losing houses, people leaving California, people driving, Uber Eats, you know, as opposed to doing what they really want to be doing. So, you know, it's just like any other crash in any other industry. The one thing I am hearing that's very encouraging is people aren't telling me I'm going to quit the business. The kind of person who goes into this business understands that it's not a stable industry.

DAVID: And making things even less certain is the potential for yet another strike this summer, this time by IATSE, the union that represents a lot of these “below-the-line” workers. Do you think what is happening right now is going to impact whether there’s going to be a strike?

DIANE: Well, you know, it's interesting people say that they feel like the IATSE workers,. The Teamsters, the below the line folks will cave more quickly because they've been out of work for a long time to even know that these were not their strikes. I don't know if that's true, but I do know that probably what you're going to see is people are just going to have to wait and see, because one of the producers I talked to told me that, hey, if you get started on the production, you think, okay, if I got two strikes, I'll go do it in Canada. You can't because, you know, there's sort of an international bond between these units that says we won't take strike work from you. So that whole thing of, let's be very careful, let's be cautious, and that I think, you know, what I'm hearing is going to spill over a bit into content too, is okay. When we do ramp up, we're not going to be as willing to take risks. We're not going to see as many really wacky series say on an even on a Netflix. Much more of what I'm hearing is that they're going to have more procedurals, which is an interesting thing, because they're saying, hey, you know, if we could create another Dick Wolf, to create all their shows, let's do it. It's just, again, just a little bit more of a cautious approach.

DAVID: Yeah. When in doubt, ‘make another Law & Order’ has really never failed for anybody. So far,

DIANE: It has never failed anyone.

<CLIP> Law & Order SVU Sound Effect

DIANE: Then the other hopeful thing is, are we going to see more lower budget productions? Just this the costs of this have gotten so out of hand. People may even be getting tired of the Marvel Universe. So maybe we don't have to have that blockbuster mentality and that could be good. That could be good for a lot of people working. You know, if we have more, smaller movies, that's always been the hope of the independents.

DAVID: We heard Cord Jefferson at the Oscars make the case for that. Right.

*<CLIP> ABC, Cord Jefferson accepts the Oscar:*

*Jefferson: I understand that this is a risk averse industry. I get it. $200 million movies are also a risk. You know? And it doesn’t always work out. But you take the risk anyway. And instead of making one $200 million movie try making 20 $10 million movies.*

DACID: And I think in a world where we go from a handful of 2 or 3 $300 million movies to a beautiful glut of $10 million movies the way Cord was asking for, how does that translate to these below the line workers?

DIANE: Well, it would mean more work with less money, you know, a lot of this smaller stuff and some of it has been able to, to at least get underway during the strikes is nonunion.

DAVID: So it sounds like to some extent there's a there's an interesting sort of middle class challenge that we're about to have where in, in a, you know, Cord Jefferson $10 million movie future, there might be lots of opportunities to get in, and there will still be ways at the top to make money, because there are always ways at the top to make money. But the kind of workaday work that a lot of these folks have relied on for so long, that's going to continue to be a challenge.

DIANE: It’s gonna continue to be a challenge. And it already has been upended by streaming.

SCORING IN <KOS\_KOS\_0297\_05701\_Nostalgia\_70\_APM>

DIANE: You know, the days of, you know, I live here in Studio City, which is kind of TV land, you know, and a lot of people have have a job on a series. And, those series aren't the same as they used to be. You know, they're they're not workaday day jobs anymore where you you go to the set and for 22 episodes, and then you take the summer off and, take the kids to the beach, you know, and careers that were built on that, on houses that were bought on that, I think that that's already becoming a bit of a challenge. It is one of the things that the, the unions are looking at in terms of the contracts that they've settled on is okay. In the old days, you you did this series, you got paid for it. And then there were reruns you got paid for those is now it's everything everywhere, all at once. You know, your show is playing everywhere. How do you get paid for that? How do you how do you, you know, justify keeping somebody under contract when you're only making eight episodes and they're being paid minimum for that? Writers rooms are they call them mini mini rooms now because they're just saying, okay, let's just hire fewer writers if we have to pay them X amount. So a lot of those games are in play. it's just instability, just in general accepting more of that, I think in your life.

SCORING BUMP

DAVID: Entertainment journalist Diane Haitman.

Today’s show was produced by Hady Mawajdeh with help from Haleema Shah. Matt Collette edited, Laura Bullard checked the facts, and Rob Byers engineered.

And one more thing: Earlier this week you heard an excerpt from a conversation Noel King had at South by Southwest with radio host Charlamagne tha God. And now, due to popular demand, we’re getting ready to drop that whole, unedited conversation with Charlemagne and political analyst Angela Rye. Find it in your podcast feed on Sunday.

I’m David Pierce from The Verge. This is Today Explained from Vox. Thanks for listening.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]