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How Chris Hemsworth Found His Way as a Movie Star With Thor and 'The Avengers'

By Ramin Setoodeh ▼



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Like everyone else, [Chris Hemsworth](#) recently bought tickets to see “[Avengers: Endgame](#).” This was actually his second time watching the Marvel blockbuster, in which he stars as Thor. The first time Hemsworth saw the film was in mid-April alongside co-stars Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans and Scarlett Johansson and thousands of teary-eyed fans at the premiere in Los Angeles. When Hemsworth returned home to Australia a few days later, his three kids — 7-year-old daughter India Rose and 5-year-old twin sons Sasha and Tristan — persuaded him to join them for a showing.

“My kids were dying to see it,” Hemsworth recalls. “I wasn’t going to take them. They were like, ‘Dad, we have to go!’ We found a small cinema so we wouldn’t get overwhelmed. I wondered if it would

hold their attention for three hours.” He pauses. “They loved it.”

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Didn't anybody notice the six-foot-three Thor in the theater? “We already had our seats in the back,” Hemsworth explains. “I had a hat on. We came into the cinema just when the ‘Men in Black’ trailer was playing,” he says about his next high-profile project. “It was kind of a double hit.”

This summer, Hemsworth is trying to pull off that rare thing in Hollywood: back-to-back blockbusters. “Avengers” has already grossed a stunning \$2.6 billion worldwide, and it's closing in on “Avatar” as the No. 1 movie in history. In “Men in Black: International,” Hemsworth stars opposite Tessa Thompson as the new agents in the series, which has banked \$1.7 billion in global ticket sales after three installments with Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones. If Hemsworth can turn the fourth movie — opening in theaters on June 14 — into another hit, he will cement his status as one of the biggest and most bankable movie stars in the world.

That isn't as easy as it once was. Hemsworth, 35, is fully aware of how challenging it's become to lure audiences to the movie theater, a pastime that he's loved ever since he was a young boy growing up in Melbourne. And in the post-Thor world, headlining a major franchise has never been trickier. While the 22 movies from the Marvel Cinematic Universe have all been massive, they've also sucked up a lot of oxygen, crushing other projects in their path. As a result, the budgets of competing studio tentpoles are shrinking (not including, of course, the Walt Disney Co.'s other prized possession, “Star Wars”). “Men in Black: International,” which cost \$110 million to make, is a big risk for Sony Pictures, which is hoping to revitalize a rusty, 22-year-old franchise for a new generation.

By now, Hemsworth is used to maneuvering around green screens and space aliens. He's helped steer major properties, from J.J. Abrams' “Star Trek” starting in 2009, where he played George Kirk, to the first “Thor” in 2011. He was the swashbuckling hero from 2012's “Snow White and the Huntsman,” a surprise success to the tune of almost \$400 million worldwide, although its sequel without Kristen Stewart bombed. And he proved that he was a feminist heartthrob by turning the tables on traditional romantic-comedy tropes as the hot receptionist in 2016's “Ghostbusters,” taking a back seat to Melissa McCarthy, Kristen Wiig and Leslie Jones.

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Downey Jr., who plays Iron Man, notes the current climate of the movie business. “I mean, look, it’s an interesting time,” says the actor, who has befriended Hemsworth over the years of working opposite him in the Marvel movies. “All the challenges for all of us, whether we’ve got a few more dances on our card with Marvel or not, is we always presume that we are the apex predators in the golden age of history. Then every 10 or 12 years, it inverts and becomes something new. Who knows what the future of Marvel is going to be?”

On a spring day in Los Angeles, Hemsworth sits down with *Variety* for a conversation about his relationship to his work. “I asked Tom Cruise years ago what drove him to make certain decisions on films,” Hemsworth says. “He said, ‘I just want people to see my movies. I don’t want to put that much blood, sweat and tears into it, and have it come and go.’” As he earned his own stardom, Hemsworth has adopted a similar philosophy — he wants people to see his movies on the big screen. “I just love the theatrical experience,” he says. “I think there’s nothing quite like it, and the industry will change in a big way if we don’t get people to the cinema.”

Still, he acknowledges there aren’t many opportunities that can compete with playing a Marvel superhero. Hemsworth is attached to portray Hulk Hogan in a biopic directed by Todd Phillips, and he’s signed on for “Down Under Cover,” a buddy comedy with Tiffany Haddish that sold for \$40

million to Paramount Pictures out of the Cannes Film Festival. Both announcements were met with cheers on Twitter. (Hemsworth is a rock star on social media, with some 34 million fans on Instagram following his latest adventures — often at the beach or with some Australian critters.)

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He says he's gotten more selective with experience. He turned down the next "Star Trek" sequel because he wasn't sold on the script. "I didn't feel like we landed on a reason to revisit that yet," he reveals. "I didn't want to be underwhelmed by what I was going to bring to the table." His name has been floated as a replacement for James Bond after Daniel Craig retires. He's open to the possibility, but he also endorses another contender. "My vote would be Idris [Elba]," he says. "I think he'd give it a different sort of swagger, too, and each time someone new comes into the role, I think you've got to offer up something different."

That's been his own motto. Hemsworth, whose creativity has always been fueled by a certain restlessness, doesn't want to be a bland action star. Just look at his part in "Endgame." He pushes Thor into unexpected directions as an Avenger in exile, having the chiseled hero develop a potbelly and grow a scraggly beard. "Boy, did he go bonkers," Downey Jr. says. "He went out to the bleeding edge. I have a rule, which is if you think you're at 70%, then start pulling back, because it's probably at 105. He went out into some pretty risky atmosphere of nuttiness."

On set, Hemsworth called himself "Lebowski Thor," a reference to the slacker played by Jeff Bridges in the Coen brothers comedy. "I like that anything goes," Hemsworth says. "You're not locked into expectations." Originally, Thor was supposed to revert to his old self in the middle of "Endgame," but Hemsworth fought to keep his pear-shaped body. "I enjoyed that version of Thor," he says. "It was so different than any other way I played the character. And then it took on a life of its own."

Anthony Russo, who co-directed "Endgame" with his brother, Joe, says that Thor's character arc was a favorite of his. "Part of Chris' magic as a comedic actor is his dedication to the depth of the character on a very earnest level," Russo says. "We love those kinds of performers. It's so devious and subversive when comedy is coming from a place of complete commitment and emotional complexity."

Hemsworth relished the transformation. "Physically, it was a good three hours in hair and makeup," he says. "Then the prosthetic suit, particularly for the shirt-off scene, that was a big silicone that weighed about 90 pounds. It was certainly exhausting. I had weights on my hands and ankles just to have my arms and legs swing differently when I shuffled along through the set."

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Some of his co-stars teased him between takes. “People just kept coming up and cuddling me like a big bear or rubbing my belly like I was pregnant,” Hemsworth says. “Or trying to sit on my lap like I was Santa Claus. You get a lot of affection. I felt like an old man, an old grandpa, with a bunch of kids around. And then you get sick of it when people come up and grab your belly. ‘Don’t grab me like that!’ I know how my wife” — the actress and producer Elsa Pataky — “felt when strangers would come up and rub her belly.”

“There’s a difference between superstars and actors who study their craft. He’s a combination of both.”

F. Gary Gray

Hemsworth is more candid than most movie stars are about his career, both his successes — which he still struggles to own — and his misfires. He’s not so fond of his 2015 performance as a computer hacker in Michael Mann’s “Blackhat,” which didn’t connect with audiences. “I didn’t enjoy what I did in the film,” Hemsworth says. “It just felt flat, and it was also an attempt to do what I thought people might have wanted to see. But I don’t think I’m good in that space.”

He’s not so sure what happened with 2016’s “Huntsman: Winter’s War.” Instead of bringing Stewart back, the studio added Emily Blunt and Jessica Chastain to the cast. “I don’t think we ever landed on the point of the film,” he says. “I thought we wanted to make a not-as-dark version. I felt like I was in a different movie. I was doing one thing, and there were these quite dramatic performances, which were brilliant.”

And he reveals that he almost quit one of his favorite roles to date in “Ghostbusters,” directed by Paul Feig. “The night before I was shooting, I almost pulled out,” Hemsworth says. “Three or four weeks prior, Paul said to me, ‘I’m going to write up the character. Don’t worry.’ And then I got the script and nothing had changed.” His agent, Bryan Lourd, set up a last-minute meeting with Feig, who assured him there would be a lot to do — through improvisation. “I was really scared walking onto that set,” Hemsworth says. “I had no real plan, so I was just feeding off of them, and I just felt ridiculous. So I used that.”

The career recipe for surprising himself led him to “Men in Black,” which transports its two heroes from New York to London, Paris and Morocco. “He was my first choice,” says director F. Gary Gray. “There’s a difference between superstars and actors who study their craft. He’s a combination of both. You can’t bring up Chris Hemsworth’s name without people going crazy.”

As a young actor, Hemsworth had his breakthrough in 2004 as a heartthrob high school dropout on the Australian soap opera “Home and Away.” “A big reason I started acting was because I loved film and TV, but it was like we had no money,” says Hemsworth, who is the middle son. (His other brothers, Luke and Liam, are of course also actors.) He set a goal for himself to help his parents financially. “I wanted to pay off their house, initially. That was my sort of thing.”

It put a tremendous burden on him, which in retrospect made him too stiff in auditions. “I almost put too much pressure on myself,” Hemsworth says. “If I hadn’t taken it upon myself to take care of my family, I might have been more relaxed.” After leaving “Home and Away” in 2007, he struggled

to land any major roles in Hollywood. “I remember I had an audition right before Christmas one year, where things were not going good,” he says. “I’d stopped getting callbacks, and I was getting worse feedback. I thought, ‘God, why did I do this?’”

Some of the near misses broke his heart. “I got very close to ‘GI Joe,’” he says of the action hero played by Channing Tatum in the 2009 summer hit. “I got very close to Gambit in the Wolverine ‘X-Men’ movies.” Instead, Taylor Kitsch was cast. “At the time I was upset,” Hemsworth says. “I was running out of money. But if I played either of those characters, I wouldn’t have been able to play Thor.”

In many ways, the Norse god rescued Hemsworth, at least professionally. Hemsworth famously got passed over for the part the first time he auditioned. And it only came back to him when he insisted on trying again. Even after he beat out hundreds of other actors for the role, he couldn’t shake his own doubts. “I’ve never been able to sit back and be in the moment,” Hemsworth says. From the first movie, “it was about: Am I going to get recast? Are they even going to make a sequel? Is anyone going to turn up to see the film?”

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Eventually, he found a second home in the Marvel universe. He counts many of his co-stars as close friends. “There’s a mentor element with Downey,” Hemsworth says. “There’s an incredible friendship with Scarlett and [Jeremy] Renner and [Mark] Ruffalo. With Chris Evans, I have a real brotherly bond. I think they wouldn’t pair us up on this press tour, because we just spend the whole time screwing around and none of it is on topic.”

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Asked about this later, Evans laughs and confirms it's true. "Which is such bulls—!" he says. "We had too much fun together, and truly like kids in school, we were separated because we weren't getting s — done." (Evans has an idea for a movie they could make together: "I would love to do one of those '80s buddy comedies, where we could shed the characters we are known for.")

Back at Marvel, after a few films, Hemsworth was feeling restricted by Thor's stiff and proper demeanor. When the third movie, 2017's "Thor: Ragnarok," rolled around, he approached producer Kevin Feige with a radical pitch. "After I'd done 'Avengers' and 'Thor 2,' I did feel a bit trapped," Hemsworth says. "I felt like I was typecast by whoever was writing those scripts. I feel like the creators were stuck on where they could take the character, and was this all he had to offer? I felt there was so much more we could do."

Hemsworth envisioned a more carefree, comedic evolution for Thor, which director Taika Waititi saw as an opening for a lot more fun. "The character was always so stoic," Waititi says. "I understand where they were coming from, because he's so old. The idea was he's seen everything and nothing fazes him. Unfortunately, that's not a recipe for a great character."

Ironically, Hemsworth credits the movie he almost left — "Ghostbusters" — with priming audiences to accept Thor's turn to screwball comedy. He would have liked to have done a "Ghostbusters" sequel, and he still hasn't forgiven the online fanboys who viciously attacked the reboot because the new stars were played by women. "That whole period I was like, 'What ownership do you guys have over those characters?'" Hemsworth says. "Oh, you watched the film, therefore you should have a say over where it goes? I thought it was very unfortunate and kind of disappointing."

While some of his other Marvel colleagues look like they are retiring from the superhero world, Hemsworth isn't ready to give up Thor's hammer yet.

"I'd still love to do more, to be honest," he says. "And I don't know what the plan is. I feel like we've opened up such a different character. I feel more energized for the possibility of where it could go." Hemsworth pauses to consider another outcome. "But I'll use that in other places and other characters if it's the end here."

Chris Hemsworth Photographed at 1 Hotel West Hollywood

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