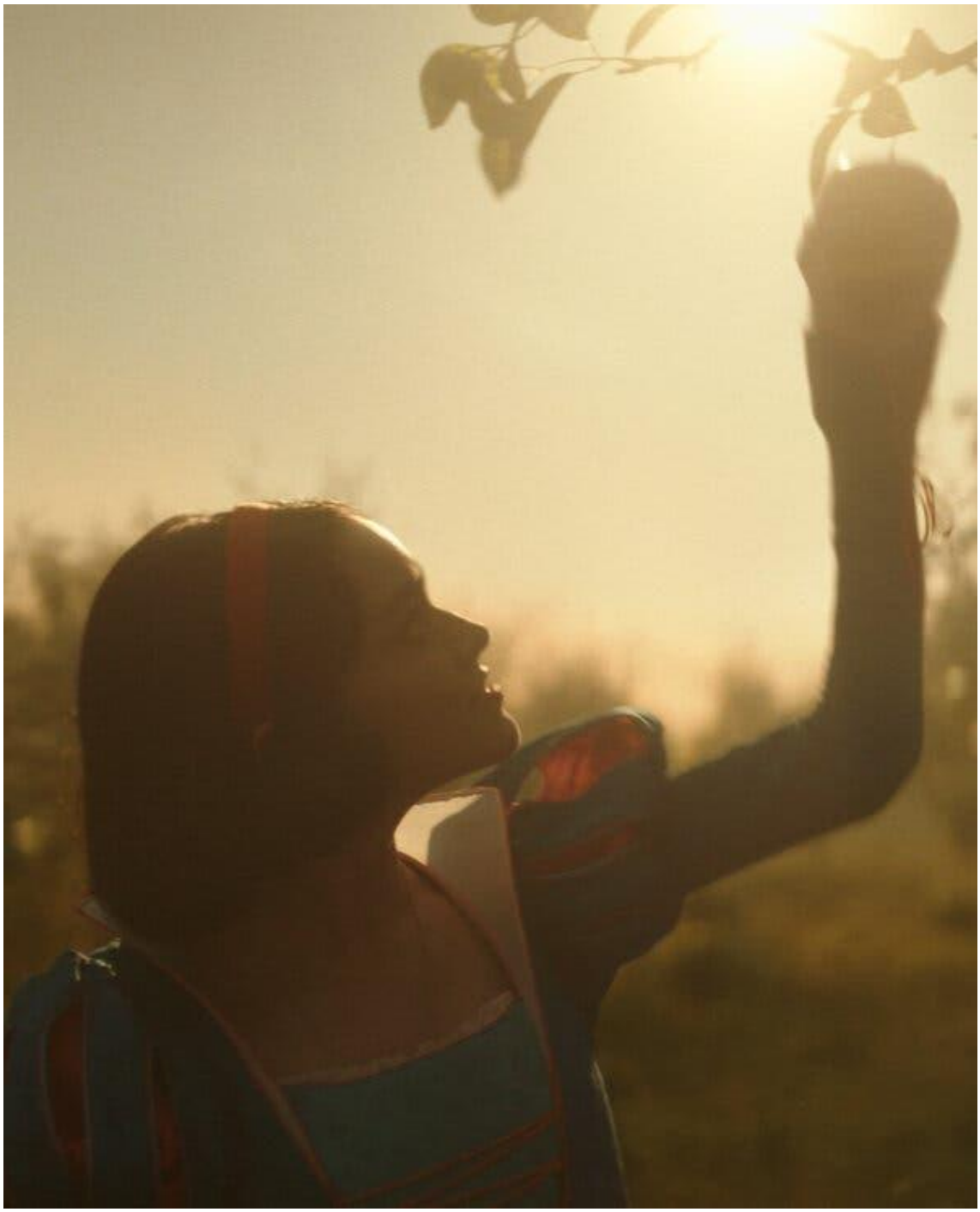
The New York Times

Snow White and the Seven Kajillion Controversies

The dwarfs. The casting. The politics of the lead actress. And that wig! Is Disney's live-action remake of the classic film doomed by culture war skirmishes?



Rachel Zegler as Snow White.Credit...Disney

By Brooks Barnes March 20, 2025Updated March 21, 2025

Disney knew that remaking "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" as a live-action musical would be treacherous.

But the studio was feeling cocky.

It was 2019, and Disney was minting money at the box office by "reimagining" animated classics like "Aladdin," "Beauty and the Beast" and "The Jungle Book" as movies with real actors. The remakes also made bedrock characters like Cinderella newly relevant. Heroines defined by ideas from another era — *be pretty, and things might work out!* — were empowered. Casting emphasized diversity.

Why not tackle Snow White?

Over the decades, Disney had tried to modernize her story — to make her more than a damsel in distress, one prized as "the fairest of them all" because of her "white as snow" skin. Twice, starting in the early 2000s, screenwriters had been unable to crack it, at least not to the satisfaction of an image-conscious Disney.

"Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," which premiered in 1937, posed other remake challenges, including how to sensitively handle Happy, Sneezy, Sleepy, Dopey, Bashful, Grumpy and Doc. (One stalled Disney reboot had reimagined the dwarfs as kung fu fighters in China.)

Still, Disney executives were determined to figure it out. They had some new ideas. More important, the remake gravy train needed to keep running.

"It's going to be amazing, another big win," Bob Chapek, then Disney's chief executive, said of a live-action "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" at a 2022 fan convention.



Ms. Zegler at the premiere of "Snow White," where security was tightened because of the tumult around the film.

Instead, “Snow White,” starring Rachel Zegler, arrives in theaters on Friday as one of the most troubled projects in Disney’s 102-year history. The movie became a cautionary tale about relevance — how trying to strike the right cultural chord at the right cultural moment can turn a seemingly innocuous movie into a proxy battle for special interests. And just about everything that could go wrong did, resulting in a case study of the perils of big-budget moviemaking in a volatile, fast-moving world and the risks of trying to endlessly mine existing intellectual property.

For Disney and Hollywood as a whole, this weekend will be a test: How much does prerelease Sturm und Drang even matter these days? Will family ticket buyers steer clear? Or will they ignore the negative chatter and trust a vaunted entertainment brand to provide a little escapist fun?

This article is based on interviews with more than a dozen people involved with the film. Together, their accounts show how “Snow White” went from promising idea to poisoned apple, and how the entertainment giant and the film’s creative team scrambled to save it.

Some “Snow White” challenges amounted to bad luck. Pandemic Covid cases flared up just as production got underway in London, forcing Disney to adopt stringent safety protocols and adding millions of dollars to the budget. One of the sets, a cottage with a thatched roof, caught fire on a soundstage. The 2023 actors’ strike forced Disney to halt reshoots. Gal Gadot, cast as the Evil Queen, suffered health complications from a pregnancy, delaying reshoots and visual-effects work.



Gal Gadot, portraying the Evil Queen, had health complications that contributed to delays.

Other problems were self-inflicted. Disney flubbed its response to leaked on-set photos of new characters (a troop of seven woodland inhabitants known as bandits) that appear in the new film *alongside* the seven dwarfs, but that led fans

to worry the dwarfs had been expunged entirely for political correctness. And Ms. Zegler went rogue in interviews and on social media, sparking one controversy after another.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to the movie was the cultural shift that has taken place over the past several years.

In 2021, online trolls attacked Disney for casting Ms. Zegler, a Latina actress, as Snow White. "Snow Woke" briefly trended. But the pushback dissipated, and Disney shrugged it off. Inside the studio, executives were proud of the casting. They had been wowed by Ms. Zegler's voice and screen presence. They saw her ethnicity as a bonus. The killing of George Floyd a year earlier by a police officer had roiled every sphere of American life, prompting institutions and individuals around the country to confront racism and inequity. In Hollywood in general and Disney in particular, "We must do better" rang in every hallway.

As "Snow White" finally comes to market, however, Disney finds itself in a very different climate. Companies, including Disney, have raced to distance themselves from diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives amid a broader backlash toward D.E.I. policies by President Trump. What had been a positive — a Latina in a role associated with whiteness (it's in the *title*) — became a potential liability, with right-wing agitators (many of them adult men unlikely to see the film to begin with) hammering Disney and Ms. Zegler.

Some news outlets followed suit. The New York Post alone has published 20 articles about "Snow White" over the last week. "Grumpy, Dopey and Woke — Disney's 'Snow White' Disaster" was the headline on one.

The tumult around "Snow White" had grown so intense by the movie's premiere in Los Angeles last weekend that Disney heightened security and curtailed red carpet interviews. The entrance to the theater was hidden from public view by tall hedges on movable platforms. (The eagerness to see "Snow White" fall on its face was such that some online haters began insisting, incorrectly, that the premiere had been canceled.)

After the screening, a few Disney executives and people who worked on the film stood in the lobby searching people's faces for responses and hoping for a last-minute plot twist — that reviews would be positive and their work to keep "Snow White" on track would pay off with strong ticket sales. Maybe, in the end, the movie would not go down in the Hollywood history books as a cautionary tale. Maybe I.P. really can be reimagined for every generation, just as every studio executive loves to dream.

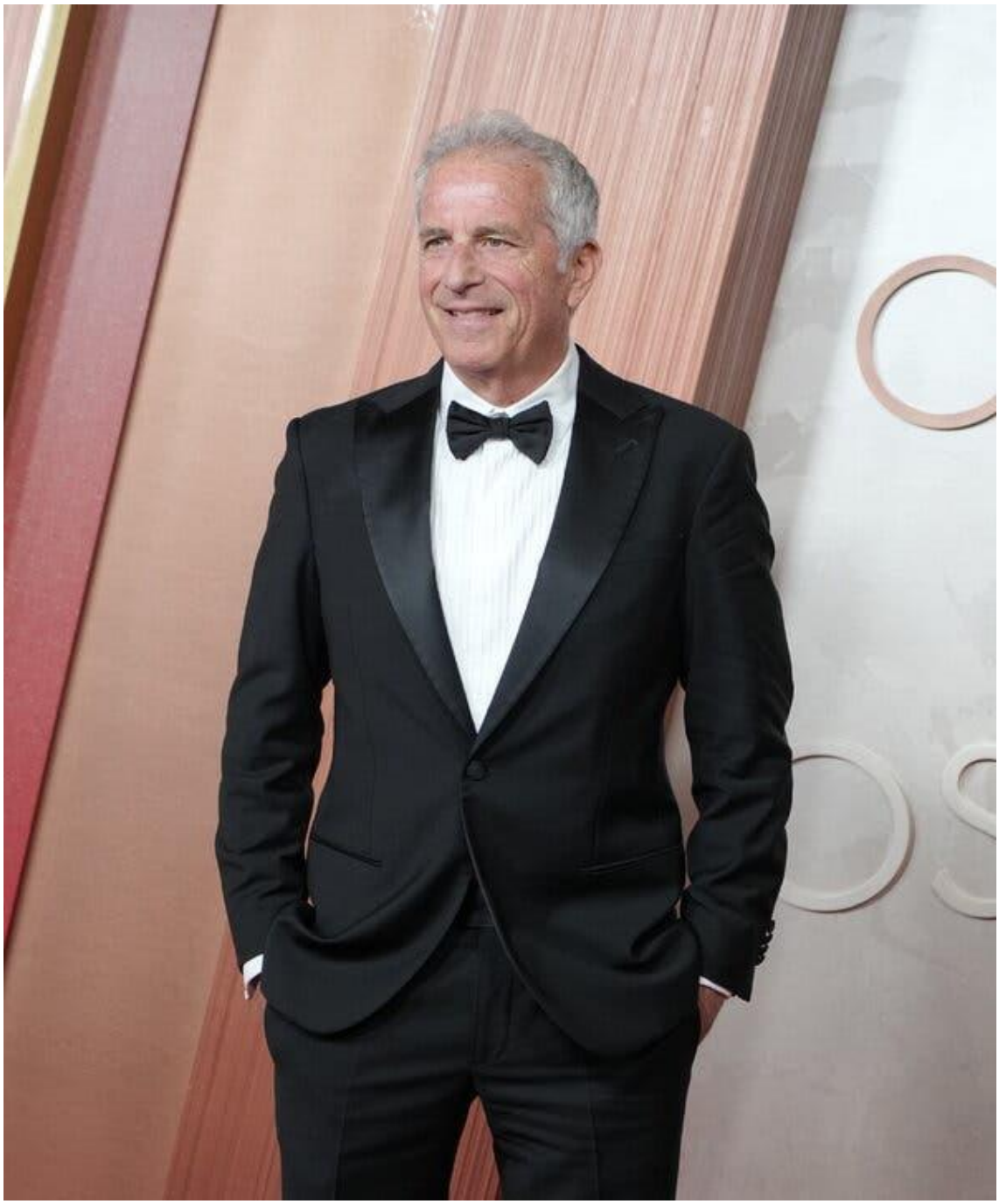
"Our job is to delight," Marc Platt, the film's lead producer, said to The New York Times after the premiere. "I'm hopeful that once audiences actually experience the film, all the noise around it will fade away and people will discover a family entertainment that is joyful, aspirational and *delightful*."

A naïve princess no longer

As the first feature-length, fully narrative animated film, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" defined a new art form. It contributed "Heigh-Ho," "Whistle While You Work" and "Someday My Prince Will Come" to the Great American Songbook.

The movie cost about $1.5 million to make (about $34 million today) and collected $184 million (roughly $4 billion) in the United States and Canada. Walt Disney bought the land for Disney headquarters with part of the profit. To this day, Disney leaders work in a building adorned with monumental statues of the seven dwarfs. Disney Animation offices sit nearby, along Dopey Drive.

Any effort to remake the movie would carry extra weight.



Marc Platt, the lead producer of "Snow White," at the 2025 Academy Awards, where he was nominated for "Wicked."

Knowing this, Disney movie executives lined up an A-plus creative team. In the producer's chair would be Mr. Platt, now a four-time Oscar nominee for "Wicked," "La La Land," "Bridge of Spies" and "The Trial of the Chicago 7." Marc Webb, who had experience with big-budget blockbusters, including two "Spider-Man" movies, came aboard as director. Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, the EGOT-winning songwriting partners ("Dear Evan Hansen," "The Greatest Showman"), would contribute new tunes.

Ms. Zegler was winning raves for playing Maria in Steven Spielberg's "West Side Story." Ms. Gadot was literally "Wonder Woman."

The production would be colossal, sprawling across 10 soundstages in suburban London. Eight visual-effects companies in three countries would digitally create the dwarfs, the magic mirror and a multitude of cutesy animals (owls, bunnies, birds, turtles, squirrels). For the deer, puppeteers would be employed.

Most important, the screenwriter Erin Cressida Wilson ("The Girl on the Train") had collaborated with Mr. Pasek and Mr. Paul to modernize the story. Snow White, now named after a wintry storm, was no longer a naïve princess defined by her looks; she was a leader in training, someone the Evil Queen despised because she was beautiful, yes, but also because she prized *fairness* as a leadership quality. The prince was dropped; that love interest became a Robin Hood-esque scofflaw. And the dwarfs, especially Dopey, were given character arcs of their own — more emotional depth, less bumbling physical comedy.

Greta Gerwig ("Barbie") and five other writers did polishes. Satisfied by their work, Alan F. Horn, then chairman of Walt Disney Studios, pushed the project forward with a budget of $210 million. It was fall 2021. He retired from Disney shortly thereafter, entrusting execution to his former team.

'I was born to play Dopey'

From the beginning, Disney knew the seven dwarfs could become a public-relations nightmare. Disney fans delight in them. The dwarfism community, however, tends to view the characters as infantilizing, dehumanizing and hurtful.

The studio hired three dwarfs as consultants to help navigate potential pitfalls.

The first real blowback came in January 2022 when the actor Peter Dinklage ("Game of Thrones") criticized Disney for remaking "Snow White" during an appearance on Marc Maron's "WTF" podcast. "I was a little taken aback when they were proud to cast a Latina actress as Snow White," Mr. Dinklage said. "You're progressive in one way, and you're still making that backwards story about seven dwarfs living in a cave? Have I done nothing to advance the cause from my soapbox?"

Disney swiftly put out a statement: "To avoid reinforcing stereotypes from the original animated film, we are taking a different approach with these seven characters and have been consulting with members of the dwarfism community."

Because Disney did not explain its "different approach," however, damaging theories began to wash across the internet. Had the studio decided to do away with the dwarfs? After all, they had disappeared from the title of the film.

Then an on-set photo leak turned what had been an online brush fire into an inferno. In July 2023, The Daily Mail published images that appeared to show the seven dwarfs being played by actors and actresses of various races and ethnicities; only one of them was a dwarf. The headline was "Snow White and the Seven ... Politically-Correct Companions?"

At first, a Disney publicist said the photo was fake. The company then reversed itself. But Disney, worried about spoilers, did not provide a crucial piece of information: Those weren't the dwarfs. This movie would feature two groups of seven — a troop of bandits (depicted in the photo) and a separate troop of C.G.I. dwarfs, to be added in postproduction.



Peter Dinklage presenting an Emmy Award in January. On a podcast in 2022, he criticized Disney for remaking "that backwards story about seven dwarfs living in a cave."

As the initial March 2024 release date moved back — Disney was underwhelmed by the first cut and ordered reshoots — the studio found itself playing Whac-a-Mole with one dwarf controversy after another. When it finally emerged that Disney had opted to use C.G.I. to render Doc, Sleepy, Bashful and the gang, the company came under attack for the "erasure" of people with dwarfism.

Others criticized Disney for denying them jobs. "I was born to play Dopey," Matt McCarthy, an actor with dwarfism, told reporters on Monday as he and his wife, an actress with dwarfism, planned a protest outside Disney headquarters in Burbank, Calif. "When you're a little person, opportunities are few and far between," he said.



Ms. Zegler's political posts on social media created headaches for Disney.

The star goes rogue

On Aug. 9, 2024, Disney's marketing campaign for "Snow White" kicked into a higher gear with the release of a teaser trailer. It did not go well.

Some people criticized the dwarves. Others mocked Ms. Zegler's wig, likening her helmet hair look to Lord Farquaad from "Shrek." Many simply questioned the wisdom of remaking the 1937 original. (As of Wednesday, roughly 102,000 people had clicked "like" on the trailer on YouTube, while 1.5 million had clicked "dislike.")

But the real headache came a few days later when Ms. Zegler shared the trailer on X and added, "And always remember, free Palestine." In an instant, "Snow White" became part of a highly divisive global political conversation — the opposite of what Disney wanted. Ms. Zegler's comment also caused a severe rift with Ms. Gadot, who is Israeli. (Both actresses declined to comment for this article.)

Hollywood's studio system days are long gone. Stars are free to express themselves as they wish. All studios can do is beg: Please, pretty please, *stay on message*. (Ms. Zegler had already angered fans of the original movie. "People are making these jokes about ours being the PC Snow White," she said in 2022. "Yeah, it is — because it needed that.")

The best containment strategy, Disney decided, was silence. Asking Ms. Zegler to take her post down could generate more attention — especially if she told her followers that she had been pressured to do so. But Mr. Platt flew to New York from Los Angeles to have a heart-to-heart with Ms. Zegler. He explained how much was at stake, both for Disney and for her career, and asked her to post heedfully.

She seemed to understand.

In November, however, Ms. Zegler took to Instagram to sound off about the presidential election. In a post salted with expletives, she harshly criticized Mr. Trump and those who had voted for him.

It had only been a short time since Disney had tried to turn a corner with MAGA followers by ending a spat with the governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, over Disney World. A new skirmish could threaten the détente.

Within seconds of Ms. Zegler's Instagram post, screenshots of the screed pinged between phones at Disney headquarters. How could the studio possibly trust her to participate in the coming "Snow White" publicity tour?

This time, members of Ms. Zegler's management team, including agents at Creative Artists Agency, sprang into action. Her post was quickly replaced with an apology. "I let my emotions get the best of me," she said. "I'm sorry I contributed to the negative discourse."

But it was too late. Ms. Zegler, "Snow White" and Disney had already been in the cross hairs of right-wing pundits. Now, it was open season.

Megyn Kelly called for Ms. Zegler's replacement in the film. An anti-D.E.I. agitator, Robbie Starbuck, went on the attack. Elon Musk weighed in with a post that skewered Disney for race-swapping iconic characters.

Ms. Zegler's fans rallied around her. "So overjoyed knowing that little Latinas will be able to see themselves as such an iconic Disney princess," one commented on Ms. Zegler's Instagram page.

Disney hoped that prominent voices on the left would step up to deliver a pushback to the pushback. But it didn't happen.

"Really never, but especially right now, no studio wants its movie branded as a D.E.I. lesson," said Martin Kaplan, who runs the Norman Lear Center for entertainment, media and society at the University of Southern California.

Disney largely managed to avoid this critique as recently as 2023, when it remade "The Little Mermaid" with a Black actress in the title role; defenders were plentiful. But last month, when Disney released "Captain America: Brave New World," with a Black actor in the title role for the first time, the company had a harder time.



Anthony Mackie in "Captain America: Brave New World," which Disney released last month.

It's not an entirely new phenomenon: Think of the male-Internet uproar over the all-female "Ghostbusters" from 2016, or the ongoing fan vitriol around Disney's efforts to bring diversity to the "Star Wars" franchise. But the "anti-woke right" has grown more powerful, Mr. Kaplan noted, while defenders on the left have grown quieter, either because they feel cowed or frustrated or because even they have come to see Hollywood's aggressive diversity efforts as clumsy.

"I'm not sure anyone could have predicted that a reactionary force could so quickly and dramatically reverse the cultural winds, but that is certainly what has happened," Mr. Kaplan said. "What once were uncontroversial or proud decisions are suddenly somehow un-American."

Digital wig fixes

As "Snow White" bounced from one controversy to the next, the Hollywood gossip mill kicked into high gear: Surely, Disney would cut its losses and send this beast straight to streaming.

But sweeping "Snow White" under the rug (as the company had done with other problem movies, including the critically reviled "Artemis Fowl" in 2020) was never something that Disney considered. The budget for "Snow White" had risen to $270 million, not including marketing. Disney+ would need to absorb that cost (minus tax incentives) if it took the film. And that would undercut one of Disney's key promises to Wall Street: greater streaming profitability.

Disney also knew something the outside world did not: After the reshoots ("additional photography" in studio parlance) and extensive visual-effects work, the movie was starting to jell.

A second-act song called "Hidden in My Heart," a tear-jerker sung by one of the dwarfs, had been cut to speed the story along. A new scene near the finale involving the Evil Queen and magic mirror had added spectacle. That troublesome wig had undergone digital fixes.



Ms. Gadot at the magic mirror. They were given a new scene near the finale of "Snow White."

Was it possible that "Snow White" was becoming ... a decent movie? At least one that would entertain the Disney faithful?

In October, executives from across the company had been scheduled to fly to Disney World in Florida for a corporate retreat. When the summit was called off at the last minute because of Hurricane Milton, the studio team used the time to focus on "Snow White." Disney's new live-action film chief, David Greenbaum, who had inherited the troubled project, gathered a dozen studio leaders in a screening room on the Disney lot and spent two days scrutinizing the movie — stopping it, starting it — to see what could be improved, according to three people with direct knowledge of the session, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a private process.

The C.G.I. dwarfs looked “waxy,” Mr. Greenbaum worried. They could also be better integrated with live-action woodland footage shot on location. What trims could be made? The bandit story line, it seemed, could be tightened by a lot.



Changes were being made to the movie until February.

Mr. Webb, the director, kept tinkering with sound and color until February.

A fairy tale ending?

On Tuesday, Mr. Webb was in an upbeat mood. Reactions from people invited to the premiere had been positive. He positioned his “Snow White” as a throwback to a simpler time.

“Now that people are seeing the movie, I think they’re surprised and warmed by how nostalgic it is,” he said in a phone interview. “This movie is nostalgic not just in its aesthetic but in its worldview. It’s wholesome and kind, and that’s what I’ve held sort of dear through this whole process.”

Reviews arrived on Wednesday. Critics praised Ms. Zegler’s performance, but were underwhelmed by the film as a whole. “It’s just, well, fair,” Nell Minow wrote on RogerEbert.com.

Based on ticket presales and surveys of moviegoer interest, “Snow White” is expected to collect $45 million to $50 million at domestic theaters over the weekend, according to box-office analysts. That start would be slow for a Disney live-action remake: In the 15 years that the company has been producing them, none of the big-budget entries have exclusively arrived in theaters to less than $58 million, after adjusting for inflation. (That was “Dumbo” in 2019.)

David A. Gross, a box office analyst, noted that some of the thrill of seeing an animated classic reimagined as a live-action spectacle has worn off in the years since “Snow White” went into production. The film’s ultimate box office tally will probably come down to what he called “the babysitter effect.”

“Never underestimate the need for a 6-year-old to be entertained,” Mr. Gross said.

Brooks Barnes covers all things Hollywood. He joined The Times in 2007 and previously worked at The Wall Street Journal. More about Brooks Barnes