

## James Cameron Dodges an Iceberg

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MAXIMUM FILM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Twenty-five years ago, in the summer of 1997, few could have predicted the impact of the looming *Titanic*. The film's planned July release got delayed until December, fueling speculation that the most expensive film ever made—with a budget that ballooned to an unheard-of \$200 million—was in deep trouble, and could never recoup its gargantuan cost.

Producer-director-writer James Cameron, who gained his reputation as an action director with such VFX trailblazers as *Aliens* (1986) and *Terminator 2* (1991), was surely in over his head, critics speculated, by attempting an epic prestige picture in the grand Hollywood tradition. Rumors of tyrannical behavior on the set only whetted skeptics' appetite for schadenfreude.

Besides, as awards season began to take shape, the smart money was on Curtis Hanson's *L.A. Confidential*, a noirish murder mystery with a knockout ensemble cast that all the major critics groups had proclaimed the year's best.

But Cameron and his producing partner, Jon Landau, had the last laugh. *Titanic* tied *All About Eve* (1950) with the most Oscar nominations (14), and *Ben-Hur* (1959) with wins (11), including best picture. Moreover, it quickly became the highest-grossing film of all time, and the first to hit the \$1 billion mark in BO receipts.

Everything about *Titanic* was big, from its title to its financing—by not one but two majors, Fox and Paramount. The production required the construction of a satellite studio in Baja California, where the world's largest water tank could accommodate a full-scale replica of the RMS Titanic.

Cameron, an avid diver and deep submergence technology freak, referred to the Titanic as the "Mount Everest of shipwrecks." Considerable pains were made to underscore the ocean liner's tremendous scale with a combination of production design and special effects. Cameron wasn't above self-deprecation about the bigness of it all. When Kate Winslet's Rose loses patience during a dinner table discussion about the ship's enormity, she suggests to the White Star Line's managing director that Freud's "ideas about the male preoccupation with size might be of particular interest."

It wasn't just size that mattered. Cameron's zealous research and quest for accuracy left no stone unturned, right down to the ship's cutlery. But the commercial elements could not be overlooked: a star-crossed romance featuring two of the big screen's hottest up-and-comers (Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio), a clear-cut villain (Billy Zane), lavish period costumes, eye-popping special effects and an end-credits power ballad (Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On") that sold 18 million copies.

Cameron's formative experiences as a moviegoer were shaped by wide-screen epics like *Spartacus* (1960) and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), which combined historic sweep and tragic romance. The director suggested that Hollywood had lost touch with "that sense of religious transport that a movie is supposed to have." And at the end of the day, what he was making was not a disaster picture, but "a love story ... about the human heart." ■