

Master of thrills on a shoestring

By Matthew Garrahan

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Man with a van: Jason Blum has customised a Chevrolet Astro-Van and hired a driver so he can work between meetings on projects

Jason Blum is one of Hollywood's most sought-after producers, scoring with low-budget commercially successful films that have grossed hundreds of millions of dollars at the box-office. Yet when it comes to his choice of car, he does not fit the stereotype of the flash movie executive.

In status-soaked Hollywood, most producers would not be seen dead in anything other than a Bentley or Maserati. But the 42-year-old producer of the blockbuster *Paranormal Activity* series and the recent horror hit *Insidious*, drives a rather more modest Chevrolet Astro-Van.

On the outside, the van looks like it might be driven by a plumber, apart from the Blumhouse Productions logo. Inside is a different story. "I had it customised," says the tousle-haired Mr Blum, leaning back in a chair in his spartan office on the Paramount Pictures studio lot – an office that was once Lucille Ball's dressing room.

The van has a customised interior, with 36in flat screen television, printer, cable television, wireless internet and surround sound. As a driver takes him from meeting to meeting, he "can work while on the move".

The van is emblematic of the low- budget production model he has embraced at a time when the cost of releasing a film is at an all-time high and Hollywood studios are looking to take fewer financial risks. Mr Blum finances his films independently, but partners with larger companies that then shoulder the print and advertising costs. For a wide US release, these costs can often be more than \$20m, but without a hefty marketing campaign smaller films, however good, can often die on the vine.

With *Insidious*, the film cost \$1.5m to produce but has grossed \$52m in the US and \$20m internationally. It will gross more yet, because it has still to open in some European markets, South America and Asia.

Plenty of low-budget films are financed outside the Hollywood studio system, but what differentiates Mr Blum's model is that his titles are backed by studio marketing muscle. Also, while most independent films are aimed at niche audiences, he is unashamedly commercial, looking to reach the widest possible audience. "An inexpensive movie doesn't have to mean that it has to have a limited release," he says. Thanks to Mr Blum's studio partners in the US – Sony Pictures Worldwide and FilmDistrict – *Insidious* was released on 2,500 screens, accompanied by a sizeable marketing push.

Mr Blum has been producing films since 1995 but first put Hollywood on notice two years ago with *Paranormal Activity*. The first instalment cost only \$15,000 to produce but earned \$199m worldwide, making it the most profitable ever released in terms of the ratio between production budget and box-office gross. A second movie was released last year, generating \$170m, and a third is in production.

The success of those films, and of *Insidious*, suggests that Mr Blum may be on to something with his cost-conscious approach. He shuns a large upfront salary in return for a bigger share of the profits once the film has been released – and persuades key talent, such as the star actors and director, to do the same. “I’m a big believer in cutting costs, whether that’s development costs or production costs. You have to try to do a lot with a little,” he says.

The son of Irving Blum, the art dealer who arranged one of Andy Warhol’s first solo shows, and Shirley Blum, an art historian, he was raised in New York where he dreamt of producing films in Hollywood. “I grew up in a house full of creative people and I always felt comfortable with creative people,” he says. But creating art himself was never an ambition: “I don’t have any desire to write or direct. I very quickly became interested in creating forms for artists to let them do what they do best.”

He was able to break into the film business while at Vassar College, when a friend’s introduction helped him get a job at a small film company. That then led to his big break at Miramax, the company behind *Shakespeare in Love* and *Pulp Fiction*, where he spent a decade working for Harvey and Bob Weinstein, two of the film industry’s toughest negotiators.

It was the perfect apprenticeship. But one incident that has haunted him ever since was when he passed on the chance to buy *The Blair Witch Project*. Shot for a few thousand dollars, the film went on to gross \$240m around the world. It was reminiscent of being the record label that turned down The Beatles, and had a “profound” effect on him.

“It taught me that you have to trust your own convictions. So many very smart, very reasonable people told the Blair Witch guys their movie would never work.

“It taught me to not be discouraged by what other people say,” he adds, a lesson he says he has put into practice with *Paranormal Activity*. In 2007, Mr Blum was sent a copy of it on DVD: “I called the people representing it and said: ‘There’s definitely theatrical life in this’.”

But releasing it was the biggest struggle of his career after he came on board as producer. He showed the movie to two influential Los Angeles-based film critics and tried to sell it at the Slamdance film festival – but no buyers came forward. Then he persuaded DreamWorks, the studio founded by, among others, Steven Spielberg, to screen the film at Paramount. “I knew that if I could get a decision-maker in the room I could get it on 2,000 screens,” he says. After the screening, “everyone went bananas”.

In fact, Mr Spielberg had missed the screening, but soon became a key ally: “He realised it was terrific.” A deal was struck with Paramount to distribute the film and the unlikeliest of movie franchises – one that offered a new template for Hollywood film production – was born.

While Mr Blum is mainly known for low-budget horror films, he has other projects in development and has fashioned a multi-pronged strategy for his company. This includes television production – he and Mr Spielberg are co-producing a new series for the ABC television network – a film development fund, low-budget genre movies and traditional studio movies, such as *The Wettest County in the World*, a Prohibition-era drama starring Shia LaBeouf, which The Weinstein Company acquired at the Cannes film festival.

Underpinning it all is his belief that Hollywood’s economic model is broken and needs to be fixed. “I’m trying to solve a puzzle, which is: how do you put together a movie using only a little capital that appeals to a lot of people?”

He picks up his mobile phone from the desk – which once belonged to Sylvester Stallone, the star who shot to fame with *Rocky*, another low-budget film that became a global hit. “I’ve always liked Stallone,” says Mr Blum. “He did a lot with a little too.”

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How to script success in the film business

Jason Blum, producer of low-budget blockbusters *Paranormal Activity* and *Insidious*, on making it in the film business:

● **Make the most of what you have.** “If there’s a hope of raising \$600,000 to make a movie and you have \$10,000 in front of you, take the \$10,000 and make the movie. Then, if it comes out and no one sees it, make another.”

● **Take control of your own projects.** “Instead of saying to a studio: ‘Buy the rights to this book and make me a producer on the film,’ I buy the material myself. If you bring a studio a script with a director and a star, and the studio says ‘yes’, there’s not a lot that can go wrong.”

● **Bet on yourself.** “There is an opportunity in the movie and TV business to take less upfront in return for a bigger piece of potential profits if the movie does well. It makes for a better partnership with your financier if they feel that you are all in it together and, if you succeed with them, it makes for a better product.”