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Laura Ziskin dies at 61; 'Spider-Man' producer



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When disagreements between some of Hollywood's most powerful people began to roil plans for a fourth "Spider-Man" movie several years ago, some in the entertainment industry were advising filmmakers to walk away.

But Laura Ziskin, the franchise's producer and primary creative force, decided to push forward. Even though it soon became clear the movie would have to be made without its star (Tobey Maguire) and director (Sam Raimi) — losses that would generally be considered deal-breakers — Ziskin took the then-unconventional route of starting over with a new director and actor. The result, "The Amazing Spider-Man," is set to be one of the major releases of 2012.

"She loved a challenge and she had a direct style," Lauren Shuler Donner, a longtime friend and fellow top Hollywood producer, told The Times on Monday. "She would just deal with the issues in a solution-oriented manner."

Or as Gale Anne Hurd, another A-list producer, said of Ziskin, "She was indomitable."

Ziskin, 61, died Sunday at her home in Santa Monica after a seven-year battle with breast cancer, according to a spokesman at Sony Pictures, where she had a producing deal. In interviews with friends and associates, a picture emerges of a woman who faced illness with the same no-nonsense zeal with which she made movies.

After receiving a diagnosis of Stage 3 cancer in 2004, Ziskin worked through the chemotherapy. Shuler Donner, who had been diagnosed with breast cancer four years earlier, told her friend that coming to the office or to a movie set was the best way to fight the disease's psychological effects. Although she was receiving treatments that ravaged her body, Ziskin shepherded two of the most significant pictures of her career, the second and third "Spider-Man" movies, under the shadow of the disease.

FOR THE RECORD:

An earlier version of this article reported that Laura Ziskin died at her home in Los Angeles. She died at her Santa Monica home. Also, the previous version said she was born in 1950 to Mae Lee

and Jay Ziskin. Mae Lee Ziskin was her stepmother. Elaine Ziskin was her biological mother. In addition, the earlier version said that in 2002 “Spider-Man” grossed more than \$400 million around the world. It grossed more than \$800 million.

She also saw another solution to cancer’s problem: using her Hollywood access to raise money. Soon after her diagnosis, Ziskin teamed up with news anchor Katie Couric and studio executive Sherry Lansing to found the nonprofit organization Stand Up to Cancer. The group has since held two televised events and generated more than \$200 million for cancer research.

Born March 3, 1950, in the San Fernando Valley, Ziskin graduated from USC’s School of Cinematic Arts in 1973. She started out writing game shows and working as a secretary at Playboy Films. Before long, she landed as an assistant to Jon Peters, who was producing films such as the Barbra Streisand remake of “A Star Is Born.” Ziskin’s first producing gig came when she started a company with actress Sally Field; in 1985 the pair made the dramatic comedy “Murphy’s Romance.”

In the quarter-century that followed, Ziskin made or oversaw a wide range of films, including the 1987 Cold War thriller “No Way Out,” the 1991 offbeat Bill Murray comedy “What About Bob?,” the 1990 Richard Gere-Julia Roberts romantic comedy “Pretty Woman” and 1997’s James L. Brooks’ Oscar-contending dramedy “As Good as It Gets.” That last film — along with dramatic pieces such as “Fight Club” and “The Thin Red Line” — were movies she oversaw during a stint as a studio executive. Ziskin fought to get money for those films despite fierce resistance from corporate overseers who saw them as too risky.

Another producer and friend, Susan Landau, recalled the epic battles. “She always used to say that ‘Every producer should get an Academy Award just for getting her movie made,’ ” Landau said Monday. “She read something, she grabbed it, and she forced it into existence.”

But Ziskin is best known for producing the “Spider-Man” franchise. When she set out to make the first movie a decade ago, many in the industry doubted the broad appeal of comic-book adaptations, especially one with a female producer and a relative unknown actor in Maguire. Ziskin not only cast the young performer, she took the unusual step of bringing on her life partner, Alvin Sargent, an Oscar-winning screenwriter, to write the script. (Sargent, whom she married last

year, survives Ziskin, as does a daughter from her first marriage, Julia Barry, who works at her production company.)

Ziskin was vindicated in the summer of 2002, when “Spider-Man” grossed more than \$800 million around the world. The film paved the way for the superhero fare now standard during the summer filmgoing season. In a statement, Sony Pictures Entertainment Co-President Amy Pascal called Ziskin an “inspiring warrior.”

More than any box-office achievement, Ziskin was instrumental in breaking a glass ceiling. “When you look around those [big summer] movies, there are not a lot of women on them, unless they happen to be married to the director,” said “Austin Powers” producer Jennifer Todd, part of the next generation of women producers for whom Ziskin blazed a trail. “She said a lot for what women can be capable of. We don’t just have to produce female-oriented material.”

Ziskin also produced two Oscar telecasts, in 2002 and 2007. Her first effort was notable for landing Woody Allen, famously averse to awards-show hoopla.

At the Producers Guild Awards in January, Ziskin’s voice was weak when she received the group’s “visionary” award. “In my world, the hero always defeats the villain, the boy always gets the girl, and cancer is no more,” she said.

Perhaps her most lasting legacy will be her admission to the inner circle of A-list producers, for decades considered an all-boys club. In Mollie Gregory’s 2002 book about females and Hollywood, “Women Who Run the Show,” Ziskin surveyed her new world.

“Men have built the cities, made and defined the culture, interpreted the world. At no time in recorded history have women been culture-makers,” she said. “Movies are arguably the most influential, important medium in the world. They have a tremendous cultural impact. Because women are now making movies, then women’s ideas, philosophy, point of view will seep into that culture. And that’s never happened in history. Ever, ever, ever. We can’t even see the impact of that yet.”

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