

The Orphanage: Can cinematic success be systematized?

Spain's film industry has struggled for years to hold its own against the powerful tide of American fare. Yet, in 2007, it was a modest Spanish horror film, *The Orphanage*, which became the year's biggest box office hit, beating even the Hollywood blockbusters. What were the keys to its success?

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In 2007, for the first time in many years, the top-grossing movie of the year in Spain was a homegrown production. *The Orphanage*, a tightly budgeted horror movie, raked in nearly 25 million euros and attracted more than four million moviegoers. The film's producers, Joaquín Padró and Mar Targarona, were as surprised as anyone. Virtually overnight, the movie's success made its production company, Rodar y Rodar, the focus of the entire film industry.

The success of *The Orphanage* came at an otherwise bleak moment for Spanish cinema. Weak and fragmented into hundreds of small production companies, the industry appeared incapable of reacting to dwindling audience numbers. Although many producers blamed piracy for the drop, others pointed to the Spanish public's flagging interest in domestically produced fare.

IESE professors [Sandra Sieber](#) and [Jaume Ribera](#), along with research assistant Lluís

Ruscalleda, analyze the film's various phases of production in order to identify the key factors that led to Spain's biggest cinematic success in recent history.

Rodar y Rodar: A laboratory of creativity

The Orphanage project evolved from a single nucleus: a production outfit called Rodar y Rodar. Under the direction of Joaquín Padró and Mar Targarona, the company started out in advertising, before eventually growing into a solid business venture. During the film's production, the group also developed a screenwriting workshop as well as a fiction division that worked on both film and television productions.

Thanks to the dynamism provided by advertising production, which required the duo to work with a multitude of professionals on short-term projects, Padró and Targarona had the opportunity to see firsthand the pool of talent available in the city of Barcelona. Years of experience in advertising had also allowed them to experiment with a variety of technical crews and artists, which proved an excellent testing ground for their eventual work on fiction projects with consolidated teams.

Gradually, the company was able to build a foundation of sure bets: teams of young talent armed with great creativity and professionalism, looking to make the leap to the big screen.

This time, the opportunity would come for Juan Antonio Bayona, who was one of the most prominent directors in the field of advertising and video clips. For Bayona, the chance to do his first feature film was a dream come true.

The making of a hit

Knowing that they were supporting a director of unquestionable talent, Padró and Targarona provided encouragement and advice to Bayona in his quest to find the ideal material for his feature film debut. Bayona found the seed for his project in a script by Sergio Garcia.

Longtime friends, Bayona and Garcia were equally passionate about the project. They assembled a team of professionals whom they had already worked with on other occasions and whose ability they could have absolute confidence in. The trust and friendship that existed between team members were keys to success.

The strength of the script, along with the director's passion and personal background, were enough to get two heavyweight players to come on board: The award-winning Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro signed up as executive producer, and the celebrated Spanish

actress Belén Rueda agreed to play the leading lady.

This combination of factors led everyone to be fully dedicated to the project and feel a sense of ownership in it. More than simply wanting to do a good job, the producers recognized that this movie constituted a rare opportunity to carve out a spot for themselves in an industry where competition is fierce. They knew that this was the best possible letter of introduction for their budding careers, and they made the most of it.

Distribution and marketing

In February 2007, the producers of *The Orphanage* went to the European Film Market in Berlin, looking for distributors. At the time, Guillermo del Toro's six Oscar nominations for *Pan's Labyrinth* was causing quite a stir, and anything bearing his name was music to the ears of distributors around the world. *The Orphanage* was snatched up and pre-sold in 10 countries, despite Rodar y Rodar having only presented a small, albeit stunning, trailer. The media proceeded to spread the news of this success, and thus the promotional buzz began.

Also crucial to the film's success was the participation of Telecinco and Warner Bros. As coproducer, Telecinco had an obvious vested interest in the movie being a success, since return on its investment would depend on that. The broadcaster cooperated with the movie's marketing directors, which translated into an aggressive TV ad campaign, with commercials at every break and constant references to the movie during its most popular shows. The distributor, Warner Bros., also poured three million euros into its promotion, an amount that far exceeded the overall budgets of most Spanish productions.

After a highly successful premiere at the Sitges film festival, *The Orphanage* opened widely on October 11, 2007. In just four days, the movie earned six million euros. Thanks to continued support from Telecinco and Warner, positive reviews and word of mouth, the film remained No. 1 at the box office for six straight weeks. By the end of its run in the theaters, it had brought in over 24 million euros to become the top-grossing movie of the year in Spain and the biggest box-office hit ever for a Spanish-language film.

Stroke of luck or stroke of genius?

The success of *The Orphanage* was the result of numerous factors. Without a doubt, the film's hefty promotional budget had been utilized in an exemplary way, which had a sensationally positive effect on the box-office turnout.

However, not all movies that benefit from massive and efficient promotional backing end up earning such overwhelming support from the public. Both the director and the producers attributed a good deal of the film's success either to chance or to the "magic" that surrounded the movie.

But behind this apparent stroke of luck lies a string of good decisions, which ultimately made this project a winner.

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