

[With 'Atlas Shrugged,' Hollywood May Have Its First Anti-bailout Movie](#)

By Steven Zeitchik

April 01, 2009

Hollywood could soon be going Objectivist.

After decades in development hell, Ayn Rand's capitalism-minded "Atlas Shrugged" is taking new steps toward the big screen — with one of the film world's most prominent money men potentially at its center.

Ryan Kavanaugh's Relativity Media is circling the Baldwin Entertainment project and could come aboard to finance with Lionsgate, which got involved several years ago.

Rand's popular but polarizing book — it's derided by many literary critics but has a huge public following — tells the story of Dagny Taggart, a railroad executive trying to keep her corporation competitive in the face of what she perceives as a lack of innovation and individual responsibility.

A number of stars have expressed serious interest in playing the lead role of Taggart. Angelina Jolie previously had been reported as a candidate to play the strong female character, but the list is growing and now includes Charlize Theron, Julia Roberts and Anne Hathaway.

Although it was written a half-century ago, producers say that the book's themes of individualism resonate in the era of Obama, government bailouts and stimulus packages -- making this the perfect moment to bring the 1,100-page novel to the big screen.

"This couldn't be more timely," said Karen Baldwin, who along with husband Howard is producing, with film industry consultant John Logigian advising on the project. "It's uncanny what Rand was able to predict — about the only things she didn't anticipate are cell phones and the Internet." Baldwin may be on to something -- love it or hate it, "Shrugged" is seeing a resurgence, with book sales spiking as debates rage in Washington and around the country about the government's role in a faltering free-market economy.

The author's final novel offers an embattled railroad company as a metaphor for a society that Taggart (and Rand) sees as succumbing to socialism at the expense of individual creativity. Its backbone is a 50-page speech by the mysterious but major character John Galt in which he lays out the Rand principles of Objectivism, which argues for an aggressive free market and against government activism. Let's just say it's probably not on the president's nightstand.

With all the long speeches and with plot points often a Trojan Horse for Rand's ideas, it's not an easy writing or directing gig, but producers believe they've got the man who could do it. Randall Wallace, the writer on other crisis-era, politically themed works such as "Braveheart" and "Pearl Harbor," has written the latest draft of the screenplay and is also interested in coming on to direct. (He would follow in the steps of "House of Sand and Fog" director Vadim Perelman, who had been attached to direct and fell off; we like Perelman, but would have been quite the transition for him.)

The project would likely land in the \$50 million-budget range but could go higher depending on talent.

Producers are looking to shoot next year, driven in part by the timeliness, as well as by a clause in the option. A high net-worth individual with whom the Baldwins have partnered controls the option, but that option would revert to the Rand estate if production doesn't begin by the end of 2010.

An "Atlas Shrugged" movie has gone through endless development fits and starts. Faye Dunaway and Clint Eastwood had been attached to earlier versions -- if that doesn't give you an idea of how far back it goes, we don't know what will -- but with both Rand and the Rand estate very particular about how the story was handled, those iterations didn't get traction.

This decade, Howard Baldwin and Philip Anschutz were on board to produce at their Crusader Entertainment banner, but that effort didn't take flight. The Baldwins took the project with them when the "Ray" producers split from Anschutz several years ago and pacted with the high net-worth figure, who is said to especially like the timeliness of the book's message.

Producers also say that while Relativity and Lionsgate are in the pole position to finance and distribute, other studio and financier suitors could yet materialize.

Still, Karen Baldwin praised Lionsgate and Michael Burns, who has championed the project at the studio, and also said Kavanaugh would be an appropriate partner. "The subject of the book would seem to fit with the kind of people who are willing to step up and take big chances," she said.

The Rand involvement on earlier versions -- along with the verbiage-heavy sections -- is probably why there hasn't been a Rand project on the big screen in 60 years, not since Gary Cooper played Howard Roark in Warner Bros.' "The Fountainhead." With some big-time entrepreneurs potentially coming board, there now may be a lot less shrugging and a lot more shooting.