

Jackie Chan is the highest-paid actor in Asia, and that makes sense. Besides producing, directing and starring in his own action movies since 1980, he's earned millions in Hollywood with blockbusters like *Rush Hour* and *The Karate Kid*. But the No. 2 spot goes to someone who doesn't make any sense at all. The second-highest-paid actor in Asia is a balding, middle-aged man with a paunch, hailing from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and sporting the kind of moustache that went out of style in 1986. This is Rajinikanth, and he is no mere actor—he is a force of nature. If a tiger had sex with a tornado and then their tiger-nado baby got married to an earthquake, their offspring would be Rajinikanth. Or, as his films are contractually obligated to credit him, “Superstar Rajinikanth!” If you haven't heard of Rajinikanth before, you will when you watch his latest movie *Endhiran: The Robot* which has just opened in movie theatres around the world. It's the most expensive Indian movie of all time. It's getting the widest global opening of any Indian film ever made, with 2,000 prints exploding onto screens simultaneously. Yuen Wo-ping (*The Matrix*) did the action, Stan Winston Studios (*Jurassic Park*) did creature designs, George Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic did the effects, and Academy Award-winning composer A.R. Rahman (*Slumdog Millionaire*) wrote the music. It's a massive investment, but the producers fully expect to recoup that, because this isn't just some film they're releasing; this is a Rajinikanth film.

His movie releases are greeted with special prayers and public tonsuring and *The Robot* only adds to the legend that has built up around him. Such is his fanatical fan-following that the first show on the first day of his film was at 3 a.m. in Chennai. It's also a huge bonanza for Sun Pictures which spent Rs 200 crore on production and marketing. Sun Network Chairman Kalanithi Maran wanted a Tamil film for an international audience with international special effects and technology and that's exactly what he got.

Everything about the movie was bigger and better, whether it was Rahman's music, Resul Pookutty's sound or Stan Winston Studio's special effects. With 3,000 screens multiplied by four shows a day and at least 500 seats per show, the number of people who watched *The Robot* nationwide on its opening day was an astounding 15 lakh.

*The Robot* is a visual feast and has earned rave reviews for Rajini's over-the-top performance, morphing from snake to giant man to enormous tower, intent on creating a new species, Robo sapiens. For all its lightness of spirit and comic book humour, *The Robot* is also a triumph of technology: 40 per cent of the budget of the film was spent on special effects. Everything is over the top. Fifty-seven costumes for Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and 55 for Rajini were designed by Mary E. Vogt; dance moguls like Prabhu Deva choreographed the songs and the locations varied from Vienna to Machu Picchu in Peru. Our cover story examines the phenomena and profiles the man who they say can divide by zero or drown a fish. After *The Robot*, it's almost as if he really can.



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