

BUSINESS

'Friday' Franchise Frozen as Ice Cube and Warner Bros. Fight Over New Movie

Top box office star wants rights to 'Friday' franchise from Warner Bros. and is accusing the studio of excessive delays and poor treatment. Warner says the problem is Ice Cube.



From left: Bernie Mac, Chris Tucker and Ice Cube in 'Friday' in 1995.

PHOTO: NEW LINE CINEMA/EVERETT COLLECTION

By [Joe Flint](#)

July 1, 2021 5:00 pm ET

A spat between star Ice Cube and WarnerMedia has escalated into a high-stakes blame game that threatens to permanently derail the movie “Last Friday,” the latest film planned for the long-running comedy franchise.

Over the past several weeks, the two sides have exchanged heated letters over the fate of a movie that has been in the works for nearly a decade and still isn’t close to getting done. At issue: disagreements over creative direction, accusations that neither side is engaging in a sincere manner and finger pointing over who is causing the delays.

Ice Cube, whose legal name is O’Shea Jackson, has been one of the industry’s most lucrative stars for more than two decades. Movies he has starred or co-starred in or produced have grossed more than \$2 billion at the box office.

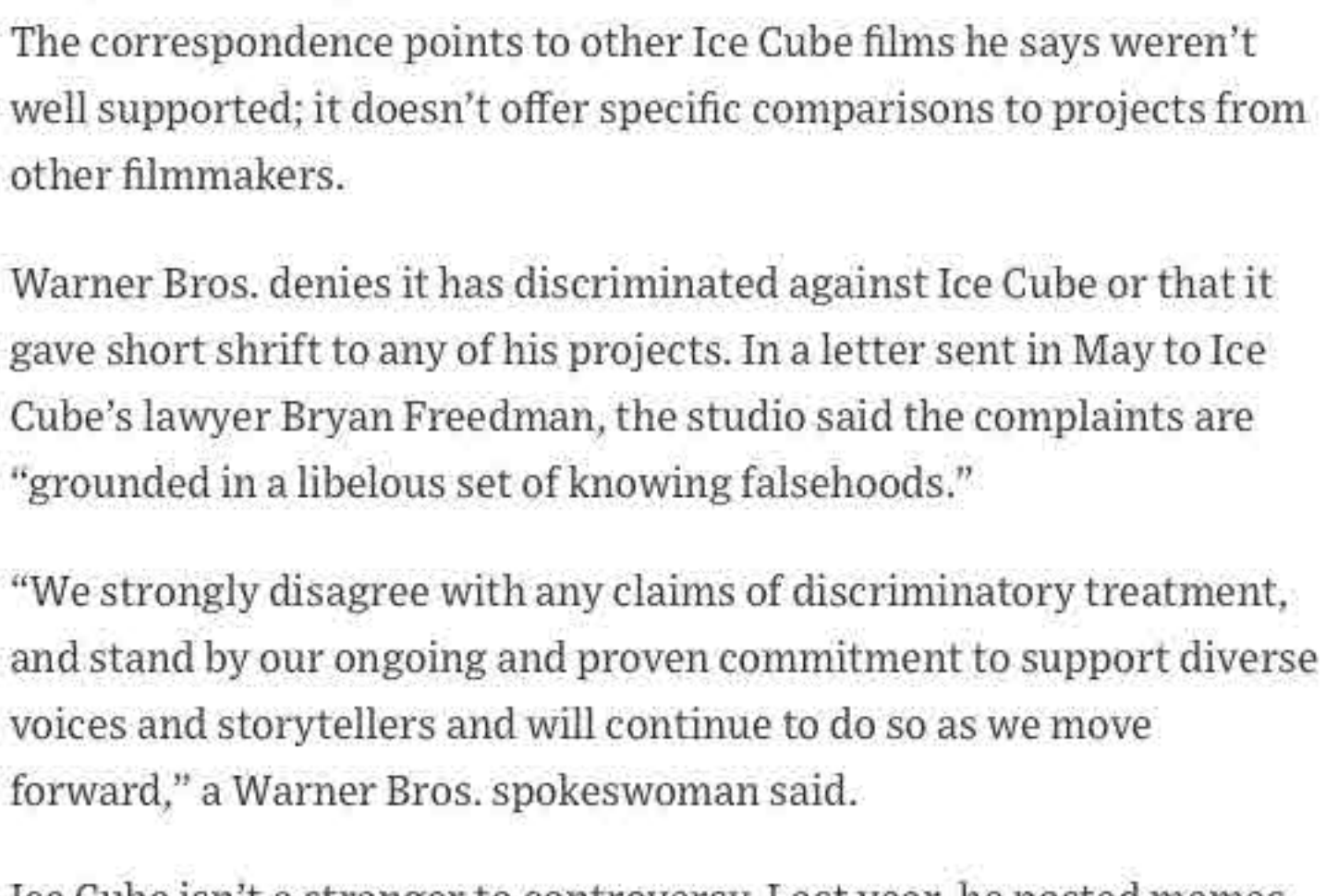
Ice Cube wants Warner Bros., owned by [AT&T Inc.](#), [↑ 1.15%](#) to surrender its rights to the “Friday” property and to two other movies he made there—“All About the Benjamins” and “The Players Club,” according to correspondence his lawyers have sent to the studio and that The Wall Street Journal has reviewed.

Warner Bros. replied, calling the demand “extortionate” and saying it won’t release rights to the valuable franchise or any other Ice Cube movies, according to the correspondence.

One letter from Ice Cube’s lawyer said the studio has been excessive in its feedback notes on the scripts Ice Cube wrote for the latest “Friday” and contends Warner Bros. has been a “poor steward” for the franchise. “These guys don’t get me, and I don’t get them,” Ice Cube said in an interview.

In a statement, the studio called Ice Cube’s contentions “revisionist history” and said they were an attempt to unjustly obtain its intellectual property.

Studio executives say delays getting a new “Friday” movie off the ground lie with Ice Cube and what they describe as his camp’s unwillingness to engage with the studio. Executives also cite Ice Cube’s other activities, including the Big3 basketball league he operates, as a distraction slowing the process.



Ice Cube performing in Wheatland, Calif. in 2019.

PHOTO: TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES

The possibility of discrimination has also emerged as a flashpoint in the conversations. In one letter, Ice Cube’s representative wrote that movies he has done for the studio “are habitually underfunded in comparison with projects featuring white casts and creative teams.” The correspondence points to other Ice Cube films he says weren’t well supported; it doesn’t offer specific comparisons to projects from other filmmakers.

Warner Bros. denies it has discriminated against Ice Cube or that it gave short shrift to any of his projects. In a letter sent in May to Ice Cube’s lawyer Bryan Freedman, the studio said the complaints are “grounded in a libelous set of knowing falsehoods.”

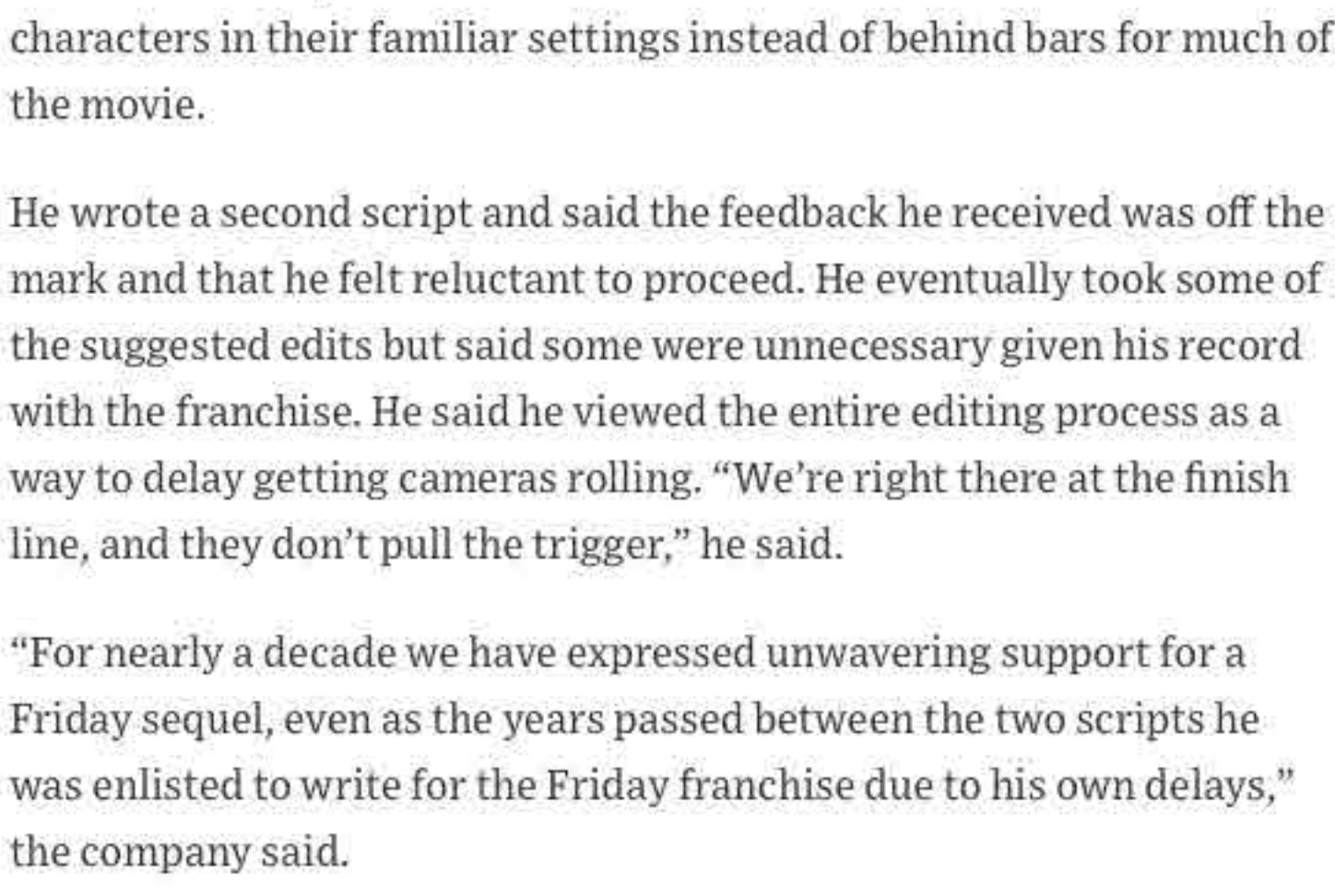
“We strongly disagree with any claims of discriminatory treatment, and stand by our ongoing and proven commitment to support diverse voices and storytellers and will continue to do so as we move forward,” a Warner Bros. spokeswoman said.

Ice Cube isn’t a stranger to controversy. Last year, he posted memes on Twitter that some called anti-Semitic. As a rapper, he has been accused of misogyny in his lyrics. Through his spokesman, Ice Cube declined to comment.

Ice Cube began his career in the 1990s in the rap band N.W.A. and went on to act, starring in hit comedies such as the “Friday” franchise. He also starred in dramas such as “Boyz in the Hood,” which grossed \$57.5 million and was critically acclaimed for how it depicted a tale of life, violence and poverty in the Crenshaw neighborhood of Los Angeles.

“Friday” came out in 1995, and was a hit about two friends, played by Ice Cube and Chris Tucker, who pass the day getting in and out of trouble in South Central Los Angeles. The movie cost only \$10 million to make and grossed \$28 million around the world. It spawned two sequels—“Next Friday,” which cost \$11 million and made \$60 million in global box office, and “Friday After Next,” which had a similar budget and made \$33.5 million at the box office. All three movies have also had strong afterlives on television.

Ice Cube and Warner Bros. unit New Line Cinema signed an agreement to make “Last Friday” in 2012. Ice Cube is to be paid more than \$11 million by New Line Cinema for acting and producing in “Last Friday,” which would make him one of the studio’s highest paid talents, people familiar with the matter said.



Director Marcus Raboy, Mike Epps and Ice Cube on the set of 'Friday After Next' in 2002.

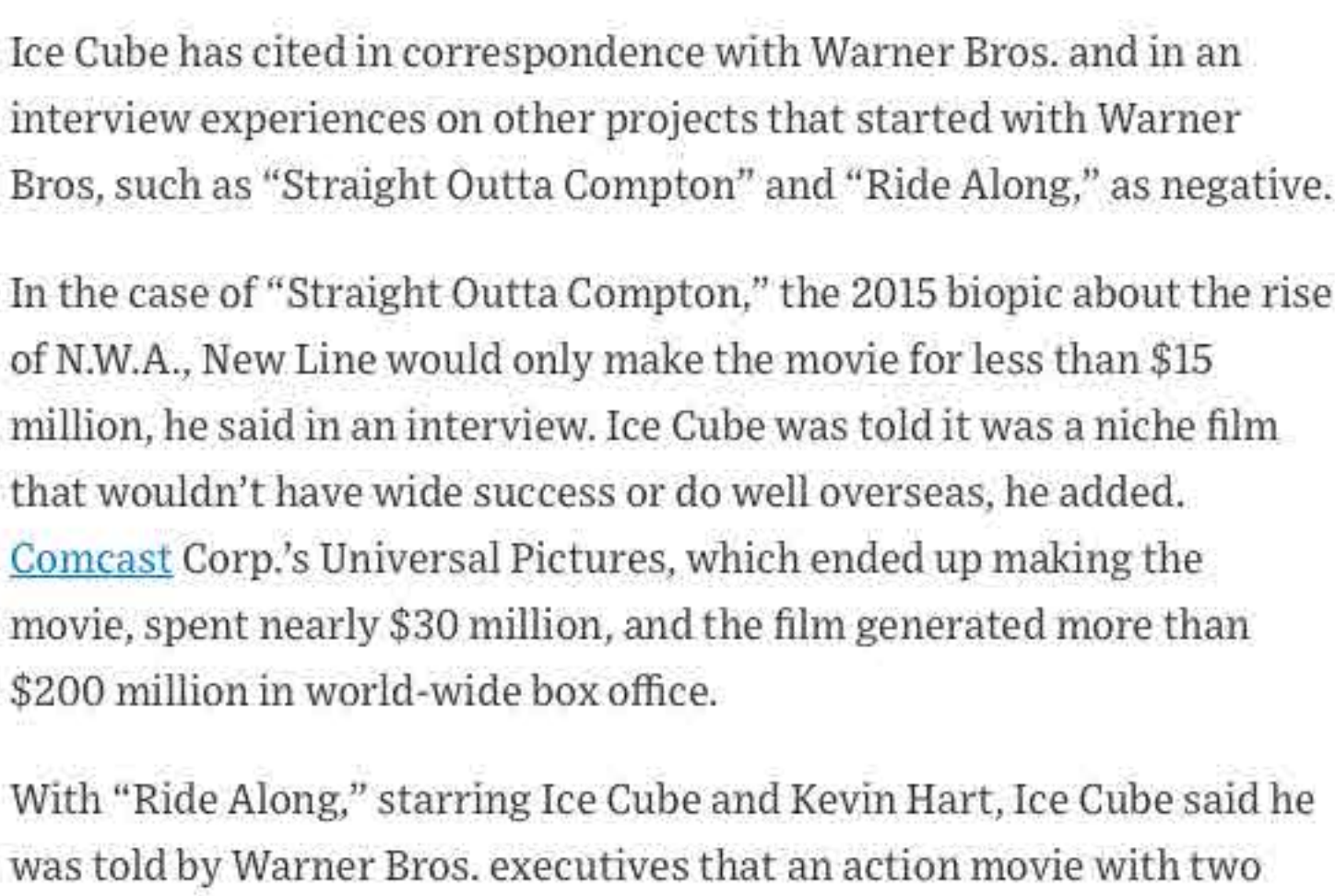
PHOTO: NEW LINE CINEMA/EVERETT COLLECTION

Ice Cube’s first script was partially set in a prison and he said went through multiple rewrites, but it ultimately didn’t move forward. He said the studio told him prison isn’t funny. Warner Bros. executives counter that they felt the fans of the franchise wanted to see the characters in their familiar settings instead of behind bars for much of the movie.

He wrote a second script and said the feedback he received was off the mark and that he felt reluctant to proceed. He eventually took some of the suggested edits but said some were unnecessary given his record with the franchise. He said he viewed the entire editing process as a way to delay getting cameras rolling. “We’re right there at the finish line, and they don’t pull the trigger,” he said.

“For nearly a decade we have expressed unwavering support for a Friday sequel, even as the years passed between the two scripts he was enlisted to write for the Friday franchise due to his own delays,” the company said.

Emails between Ice Cube, his manager and New Line in 2019 suggest discussions were friendly and people were aligned on the second script. People close to Ice Cube said the tone didn’t reflect their growing distrust of the process.



Mike Epps and Ice Cube in 'Next Friday.'

PHOTO: NEW LINE CINEMA/EVERETT COLLECTION

Long gestation periods between development and production to theatrical release often happen in the entertainment industry, but a decade is extreme for an established franchise. During the process, two key cast members died. One of the cast members who died—John Witherspoon—was to be featured prominently in the latest version of the script.

Ice Cube has cited in correspondence with Warner Bros. and in an interview experiences on other projects that started with Warner Bros, such as “Straight Outta Compton” and “Ride Along,” as negative.

In the case of “Straight Outta Compton,” the 2015 biopic about the rise of N.W.A., New Line would only make the movie for less than \$15 million, he said in an interview. Ice Cube was told it was a niche film that wouldn’t have wide success or do well overseas, he added.

[Comcast](#) Corp.’s Universal Pictures, which ended up making the movie, spent nearly \$30 million, and the film generated more than \$200 million in world-wide box office.

With “Ride Along,” starring Ice Cube and Kevin Hart, Ice Cube said he was told by Warner Bros. executives that an action movie with two Black stars wouldn’t do well, particularly overseas. Again, Universal made it in 2014 for \$25 million, and it made \$135 million in U.S. box office and another \$20 million abroad plus a successful sequel.

Warner and New Line executives said they spent years developing “Straight Outta Compton” but there was disagreement about its potential within the company at the time. Out of respect for Ice Cube, the executives said, they persuaded the company to let the film be produced elsewhere instead of keeping it stuck in limbo.

With regards to “Ride Along,” a studio executive said while there were disagreements about the script, the idea that there were concerns about how a movie with two Black leads would perform is false. The executive cited movies it made before and since with Black leads including “Shaft” and “Keanu.”

Warner Bros. still benefited from the success of Ice Cube’s films as it negotiated for a percentage of the films’ gross profits in return for their release.

Despite the bad blood, Warner Bros. said it is eager to put this controversy behind them and resume work with Ice Cube and make “Last Friday.”

Ice Cube says he wants “Last Friday.” “I’m going to go somewhere else and make a hit and embarrass them,” he said.

Write to Joe Flint at joe.flint@wsj.com

Appeared in the July 2, 2021, print edition as ‘Star, Studio Fight Over ‘Friday’ Film.’