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Casting teens in sexually explicit roles a Hollywood conundrum

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The Ottawa Citizen

Monday, August 07, 2006

The entertainment industry is once again courting controversy by casting young actors in roles that call for nudity or graphic sexual scenes.

Just ask anyone affiliated with the upcoming London stage production of *Equus*, starring teen star Daniel "Harry Potter" Radcliffe, or the new movie *Hounddog*, starring tween actress Dakota Fanning.

Both projects are making headlines over scenes involving their baby-faced actors: 12-year-old Fanning has reportedly filmed a rape scene, as well as shots of partial nudity, while Radcliffe's role requires the 17-year-old to feign sexual ecstasy while riding a horse in the buff.

"On the one hand, people would be more comfortable watching an adult (actor) and just using their imagination," says John Alberti, a professor of English at Northern Kentucky University and pop culture expert, of the ruckus over Radcliffe's participation in Peter Shaffer's celebrated play. "Yet *Equus* isn't asking us to think about a 33-year-old. It's asking us to think about a teenager."

Nevertheless, there are those who question having the star of a billion-dollar children's series take on a sexually explicit role in advance of the final three Potter movies. And in the case of *Hounddog*, financial backing was reportedly dropped due to the rape-scene controversy, which has been widely compared to the uproar when Brooke Shields and Jodie Foster were featured in prostitution-related roles -- in *Pretty Baby* and *Taxi Driver* respectively -- when they were about Fanning's age.

"Even if it's brilliant and moving and all that, who outside of pedophiles wants to see a 12-year-old get raped?" asks *Giant* magazine, which calls the scene "the worst idea of all time."

Historically, the industry has cast older actors to play young people -- Stockard Channing, for instance, was 34 when she played a high school girl in 1978's *Grease*. Exceptions to the rule, such as the largely underage cast of 1995's sexually explicit *Kids*, caused director Larry Clark to be accused of exploitation and perversion.

At the same time, it's becoming increasingly difficult for producers to sell the 30-going-on-17 act to today's film and TV audiences.

Alberti believes reality TV shows such as *My Super Sweet 16* and *Laguna Beach*, amateur videos on the website YouTube, and the Canadian TV series *Degrassi* -- all of which depict real teens -- are playing a role in forcing Hollywood's hand. The shift to age-appropriate casting, however, won't be without its esthetic challenges.

"When you saw *Degrassi Junior High*, your first reaction wasn't, 'Boy, they sure look sexy!' They looked like awkward teenagers," Alberti says. While this may reflect reality, he isn't convinced the formula will work for films that require a certain level of sexual potency in their actors.

"In John Tucker Must Die, they all look like adults because they are adults," he says, referring to the new teen movie in which 27-year-old actor Jesse Metcalfe plays a promiscuous high school jock.

"That's one reason teenagers respond to this casting. They like to imagine they're older and more attractive than they really are."

Matthew J. Smith, associate professor of communication at Wittenberg University, says the practical side of using older actors to play teens is hard to ignore.

"From a business perspective, you want to work with professionals," he observes. "Not to mention there's some stuff going on in (risque teen movies) that you couldn't shoot with actual teenagers without going to jail for it."

Wittenberg expects the "Disney model" of having young actors play their own age -- thus allowing tween and teen audiences to grow up with them, as has happened with Hilary Duff and Lindsay Lohan -- makes the most long-term financial sense.

Others, like Jeff Lyons, editor of the satire website UsedWigs, look back with fondness -- and a healthy sense of humour -- on the heyday of using "ridiculously old" actors to play teenagers.

Lyons laughs as he recalls Welcome Back Kotter's Ron Palillo, one of the stars of the 1975-79 series.

"It looked like Horshack was a twice-divorced CPA trying unsuccessfully to play a 16-year-old."

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