

Go to a Section

Quotes:

Search:



NYTimes.com > Business > Media & Advertising

# Major Stars Not So Crucial as Concept Trumps Celebrity

By DAVID CARR

**A** new kind of conjured celebrity has overtaken the American pop culture landscape.

Entertainment producers are relying more than ever on high-concept movies, reality television shows and manufactured musical projects, tilting the balance of power away from big-name, big-ticket stars in favor of franchises that mint, rather than require, famous faces.

"2 Fast 2 Furious," a star-free, street-racing sequel to "The Fast and the Furious" in which the cars outperform the actors, has made more than \$100 million in 17 days. Recently, "Dumb and Dumberer," a goof-fest that features two no-names as the younger versions of the nincompoops played by Jim Carrey and Jeff Daniels in the original, almost matched the box office receipts of Harrison Ford's pricey star turn in "Hollywood Homicide."

Seven of the top 10 programs in the recently completed television season were reality shows like "Joe Millionaire" or procedural dramas like "C.S.I." and "Law & Order" that depend on the story, not easily replaced cast members. And Kelly Clarkson, the fresh-faced winner of the first "American Idol" popularity contest on Fox, released her album in April just one week before Madonna and has outsold the one-name star by a ratio of more than two to one.

In this plug-and-play entertainment economy, concepts and marketing have become so dominant that performers are increasingly finding themselves treated like one more bit of product placement. Abundant, disposable celebrities and a proliferation of entertainment options on cable, the World Wide Web and game systems have created a cluttered environment where easy-to-understand conceits — like "The Bachelor" and "X-Men" — are needed



20th Century Fox

Kelly Clarkson and Justin Guarini, stars of the hit show American Idol, perform in the film, "From Justin to Kelly."

### ARTICLE TOOLS

- [E-Mail This Article](#)
- [Printer-Friendly Format](#)
- [Most E-Mailed Articles](#)
- [Reprints](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS SPONSORED BY SPRINT  
[E-mail this article to your PCS Phone](#)

### MULTIMEDIA

- [Chart: Stories Set the Pace](#)

### READERS' OPINIONS

- [Forum: Join a Discussion on The Media Business](#)

### TIMES NEWS TRACKER

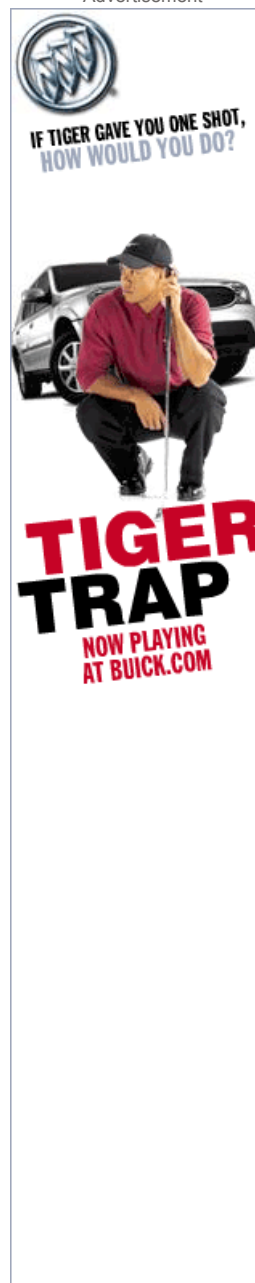
Topics Alerts

- [Television](#)
- [Motion Pictures](#)
- [Advertising](#)
- [Fox Inc](#)

- Create Your Own Manage
- Most Popular Alerts Take a Tour

[CLICK HERE TO SUBSCRIBE](#)

Advertisement



to break through. As a result, entertainment companies in pursuit of sturdy, long-running franchises are less willing to balance them on something as unpredictable as the popularity of a single star.

"You need concepts that can be easily grasped," said Walter Parkes, co-head of motion pictures at DreamWorks SKG, "that can be described quickly in the schoolyard or at the grocery store checkout. You need urgent word of mouth."

Of course, celebrities will always endure, as a glimpse of "Entertainment Tonight" or US Weekly demonstrates. And being a star can still make for a good day job: Tom Hanks, Tom Cruise, Julia Roberts and Denzel Washington all receive \$20 million or more to show up for a movie, while Ray Romano recently signed a \$40 million deal for another season of "Everybody Loves Raymond."

But a high-priced star is no longer the only answer to the high velocity of today's entertainment world, where people grant the latest film or record release a nanosecond of attention before moving on to the next big thing.

As recently as 1997, the casting for top 10 box office films looked like an A-List party: Leonardo DiCaprio, Ms. Roberts, Mr. Ford, Jack Nicholson, Nicolas Cage and Will Smith were among those who had huge hits. So far this year, cartoons, concepts and sequels like "Finding Nemo," "2 Fast 2 Furious" and "X-Men 2" rule.

Last weekend "Hulk," Ang Lee's \$120 million dark vision of a man battling against both inner and outer demons, opened on Friday on more than 3,600 screens across the country with the relatively unknown Eric Bana in the lead role. It has taken in an estimated \$62.6 million so far.

And in the coming TV season, the networks have shown more restraint than usual in handing stars their own shows, after the resounding failures in previous years of shows built around actors like Bette Midler and Richard Dreyfuss.

"A good concept gives you a rifle shot instead of a shotgun when it comes to marketing," said Chris McGurk, vice chairman and chief operating officer of [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer](#), the studio that has ridden the last four James Bond movies to gross revenues of \$1.5 billion. "It gets back to simple, iconic messages and characters."

Studios, seeking to regain the leverage they used to have over those pesky (and unpredictable) stars, are also trying harder to manage celebrity as a fungible commodity. When Tobey Maguire, the star of the successful "Spider-Man," suggested that certain stunts asked of him in the sequel might not be good for his back, the folks at Sony Pictures Entertainment let him know they would be more than happy to cast Jake Gyllenhaal, another bright young actor, in his place, according to Variety.

The parties eventually made up, but the changing balance of power between the studios and the talent was clear.

Todd Garner, a partner in Revolution Studios in charge of movie production, credits the actor Eddie Murphy with a fine performance in "Daddy Day Care," which has already brought in more than \$90 million. But, he added, the true magic is in the name of the project, not the name of the actor.

"Eddie's last few movies didn't do that well, but here you have a film and a concept that plays to his strengths," Mr. Garner said, referring to films like "Pluto Nash" and "Showtime."



#### NYT Store



NYT  
Pocket  
MBA  
Series:  
Sales and  
Marketing  
**Price:**  
**\$12.95.**

[Learn More.](#)

#### Real Estate

#### [Sign up for E-Mail Alerts!](#)

Receive the latest property listings in your inbox...

#### [Sell or Rent Your Home](#)

Post a property listing on NYTimes.com...

#### [Find a Mover](#)

Get instant quotes for full-service, self-service and last-minute moves...

#### [Get Mortgage Quotes](#)

Get instant mortgage quotes and calculate payments...

Concept and star can still work in tandem, as Mr. Carrey's playing God proved in "Bruce Almighty."

"There are a handful of legitimate stars who can open movies and fill theaters," said James A. Wiatt, president and co-chief executive of the William Morris talent agency. "And they can make a big special-effects film or a concept film much more successful by their presence."

But, according to Doug Belgrad, co-president of production at Columbia Pictures, "Studios are being much more selective about who is a movie star as the investment in production and marketing costs escalate."

Executives in television have done the same math.

Dick Wolf reinvented the crime genre when he started "Law & Order." Now he has three versions of the franchise, all highly rated, and would like to add a fourth. He says the programs are "pure concept," all cast and recast as he sees fit.

"The play is the thing," he said. "You know, it's a very funny thing, but Hamlet works. As long as the actor is good enough, it doesn't really matter who is in the role. It's the writing. If the writing is good you can replace anybody."

Jerry Bruckheimer, whose formula of loud, special effects-laden extravaganzas has proved successful in the film world, has engineered a similar work-around on celebrity on television. "C.S.I." — which follows the crime-solving efforts of a forensic crime lab in Las Vegas — successfully spun off a Miami-based version this last season. At the same time, he transferred the police procedural motif to another law enforcement unit, the missing persons division of the F.B.I., in "Without a Trace," and this fall, Mr. Bruckheimer will offer "Cold Case," which will investigate long-unsolved crimes.

Indeed, the networks are placing fewer bets on well-known actors for their new shows this fall. Back in 2000, Ms. Midler, Geena Davis, John Goodman, Michael Richards and Gabriel Byrne all had their shows canceled quickly. This season, Alicia Silverstone's and Whoopi Goldberg's new shows effectively begin and end the A-list outings.

As personality-driven comedies have withered on television, reality shows — which manufacture their own back-stories as they go — have more than filled the gap.

"It is completely about the story telling," said Mark Burnett, the creator of "Survivor." "It is not about 'The tribe has spoken' or any of that. It's about a concept where the story unfolds."

If a concept is strong enough, it can manufacture its own appeal across any number of mediums. Ms. Clarkson climbed the slippery pole of fame on "American Idol," then had a top-selling record with significant radio play, and this summer, she and runner-up Justin Guarini will appear in a teenage-friendly movie.

Thomas D. Mottola, the former head of Sony Music Entertainment who discovered Mariah Carey, among other artists, said that combining the "Idol" format and the right talent could be like "igniting gasoline."

"You could break that artist as the next global superstar," said Mr. Mottola, who now runs his own entertainment company. "The platform in and of itself is enormous in

terms of direct marketing."

Musical stardom has always been a very calculated affair — Elvis might just have just been another hillbilly if it were not for Col. Tom Parker — but the music industry is looking for sure things in perilous times. That means stars are conceived as much as discovered.

Clay Aiken, a runner-up on the latest version of "American Idol" who has unruly hair and a gee-whiz stage presence, was signed by the music impresario Clive Davis to an RCA deal.

"This Is the Night," his just-released CD single, sold nearly 393,000 copies in its first week on sale, the most since Elton John's "Candle in the Wind" remake to honor Princess Diana in 1997, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

[Celebrity](#) has been defined down to the guy or girl next door, riveting consumers who secretly hope to be the stars of their own movies.

"The wattage of celebrity has cheapened because they are absolutely everywhere," said Kim France, editor in chief of Lucky, a shopping magazine that has found success with a celebrity-free formula. "Its very ubiquity has killed it. An actress has a movie come out, she's on the cover of all sorts of magazines and on all the television shows until you know what kind of hair gel she uses.

"When Madonna first came out," she added, "an interview in Rolling Stone was a thrilling event. A trillion stories later, it doesn't have the same punch."

Unlike a star, concept has the twin virtues of low maintenance and ease of manufacture. Whether it is movies, television or music, it is often the spectacle, not stardom, that is being marketed.

Producers can even draw on veterans of past reality shows or characters created and controlled by movie studios to produce programming and bigger profits.

Mr. Burnett said he was willing to use stars in his shows, but they would be of his own making: In "Survivor 8," the winners from past seasons will face off in an All-Star version.



[Expect the World](#) every morning with home delivery of The New York Times newspaper.

[Click Here for 50% off](#)

#### RELATED ARTICLES

- [A Rising ABC Rediscovers Its Inner Regular Slob](#) (June 23, 2003)
- [It's Take 2 for Merger of Actors' Unions](#) (June 18, 2003)
- [AT THE MOVIES](#) (June 6, 2003) \$
- [Market Place: A Possible Vivendi Deal Is Raising Some Questions](#) (May 22, 2003) \$
- [A New Attempt to Monitor Media Content](#) (May 21

#### TOP BUSINESS ARTICLES

- [Idec to Acquire Biogen for \\$6.5 Billion in Stock](#)
- [Stocks Fall Sharply](#)
- [Major Stars Not So Crucial as Concept Trumps Celebrity](#)
- [Cost of Insurance for Work Injuries Soars Across U.S.](#)
- [Fannie Mae's Accounting Finds Critics of Its Own](#)



#### Advertiser Links

[Tiny, Wireless Video Camera Kit ONLY \\$79.99!](#)

■ [A New Attempt to Monitor Media Content](#) (May 21, 2003) \$

■ [CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK: Images of Evil's Flowering Disagree About Its Roots](#) (May 13, 2003) \$

Find more results for [Television](#) and [Motion Pictures](#) .

[Get \\$100 from Citibank. Details.](#)

[Click here to get your FREE 2003 Stock Market Outlook!](#)



[Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)