

IT'S ALIVE!

Hollywood will always find a way to keep a film series going
 BY MICHAEL GILTZ

When "Hannibal Rising" opens Friday, it will be the fifth film in a franchise that has already grossed more than \$800 million worldwide at the box office. And it'll be yet another example of Hollywood's ongoing love for a successful movie series.

This year will see second sequels to such titles as "Shrek," "Spider-Man," "Pirates of the Caribbean" and "Rush Hour." There'll be a second "Fantastic Four." And there'll be the latest installment of the Harry Potter films, the third entry in the "Ocean's Eleven" racket and a fourth "Saw" slasher flick. (This comes off last fall's megasuccessful James Bond reboot, "Casino Royale," and last summer's semi-successful "Superman Returns.")

Trying to reenergize an old series will be a new "Die Hard" actioner and a revamped "Halloween." And trying to launch a new franchise will be the live-action/CGI "Transformers"; "Nancy Drew," the original girl detective; and "The Golden Compass," the first movie from the best-selling book series "His Dark Materials." And 2008 could bring the expected return of both Indiana

Jones and "Beverly Hills Cop." In other words, franchises are big business, and keeping them going is Hollywood's most important task. Here's how they do it.

START FROM THE BEGINNING

One key way to reenergize a franchise is to return to its roots and tell the "origin" story. Even if it's been told before, that's a sure way to get fans interested again. It worked for 2005's "Batman Begins" and the 2006 model James Bond. Clearly, the folks behind the Hannibal Lecter films hope it works for them, too.

For "Hannibal" director Peter Webber ("Girl With a Pearl Earring"), the chance to tell the origins of everyone's favorite cannibal-esthete was irresistible. And, he admits, in some ways, creatively easier.



'BATMAN BEGINS'
 The successful 2005 revamping of the comic-book hero is the new model for relaunching a movie franchise.

"For a filmmaker, it means you can come along and approach it in your own way," says Webber. "You're not as hemmed in when you do the origin story. Maybe prequels give you more freedom than sequels."

HIRE A GOOD DIRECTOR

That might seem obvious, but when you're dealing with a massive franchise with merchandising and tie-ins and all sorts of massive expectations, the last thing on anyone's list is creativity or filmmaking vision. Often, Hollywood thinks delivering expected results is more important than the people who make the movie. Big mistake.

"Hiring Christopher Nolan to do 'Batman Begins' was inspired," says film historian and critic Leonard Maltin. Nolan, an Englishman who'd made the critical fave "Memento" (2000), "brought an adult sensibility to the property and a great eye for casting," says Maltin.

Other examples include Alfonso Cuarón ("Y Tu Mama Tambien," the new "Children of Men") taking on the third Hogwarts adventure, 2004's "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban"; Ridley Scott doing 2001's "Hannibal," and Len Wiseman ("Underworld") tackling the upcoming "Live Free or Die Hard." Certainly Webber, whose main credit is an art-house hit about a 17th century painter, isn't the obvious choice for "Hannibal Rising."

"For a start, it's on a much bigger scale, it's much more epic," says Webber about why he agreed to do it. "And there's a great World War II battle at the beginning. For me, it was a change of pace — something quite different, and, frankly, I wanted to flex my muscles and show that I could do something else."

RECAST THE LEAD

This is inevitable for a series like the James Bond films, which has been active for decades. "Obviously, they got so much buzz about Daniel Craig," says Maltin. It's also worked for Batman (even before Christian Bale wore the cowl in "Begins," the Dark Knight was played post-Michael Keaton by Val Kilmer and George Clooney), as well as countless other franchises dating back to the 1930s and '40s. Some roles, of course, are wedded to a particular ac-

tor. But if there's money to be made and enough time has passed, those franchises can be restarted. Is "Die Hard" unthinkable without Bruce Willis? Today, yes. Twenty years from now? We'll see.

GET SERIOUS

That's what they did with Batman, thanks to Tim Burton's 1989 film that washed away memories of the '60s TV show (and Nolan's film, which buried the kitsch of Joel Schumacher's two Bat-flicks). And it was the fuel behind "Superman Returns," which ignored the broad, almost silly, final two movies with Christopher Reeve (and the Harlequin romance feel of "Lois & Clark" and teen angst of "Smallville," both on TV). Sylvester Stallone did the same with the recent "Rocky Balboa," which returned the Philly fighter to his gritty roots. And that's, of course, what they did with Bond, which scored the trifecta of recasting the lead, telling the origin story and getting serious.

"They took a series that had turned outlandish and made it solid and viable again," says Maltin of Bond.

THINK CROSSOVERS AND SPINOFFS

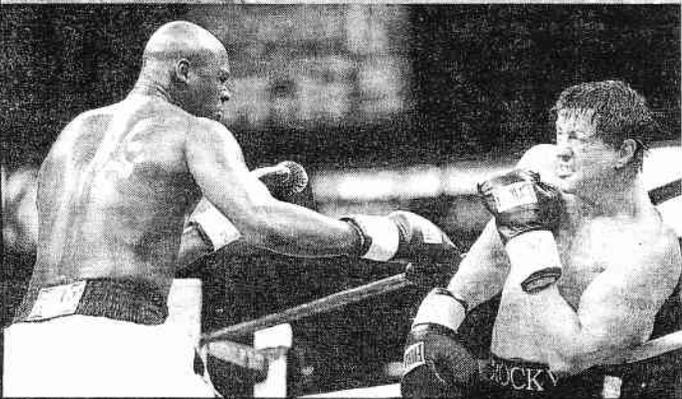
These are sometimes the sign of a desperate franchise. "Alien vs. Predator" and "Freddy vs. Jason" are recent examples that made an impact, and their precursors are such 1940s flicks as "Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man" and "Abbott & Costello Meet Frankenstein." Then there are spinoffs like the upcoming "Wolverine," which makes sense since "X-Men" has run its course with the current story line (and Hugh Jackman was that series' breakout star). And "Scary Movie" has proven remarkably durable by spinning off titles like "Date Movie" and last weekend's No. 1 film, "Epic Movie."

WAIT. JUST WAIT.

Finally, the surest way to reenergize a movie series is simply to let it rest for a while. Stallone found that time made people forget 1990's "Rocky V" and remember the character they loved. And it's been so long since a successful live-action Tarzan movie has been made that rumors of director Guillermo del Toro ("Pan's Labyrinth") tackling the series can get fans excited all over again. As Maltin says, "I would love to see that." ♦



'CASINO ROYALE'
 It seemed risky to bring in Daniel Craig (with Eva Green) as James Bond, until it became a smashi.



'ROCKY BALBOA' Sylvester Stallone (with Antonio Tarver) wanted to erase the pain of 1990's "Rocky V," as did audiences and critics, who pulled their punches.