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Gray means green: Mature stars score at the box office

BY JULIE HINDS • FREE PRESS POP CULTURE WRITER • JUNE 3, 2008

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Look closely at the top summer movies and notice the special effects they're having on the perception of age.

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At 65, Harrison Ford is saving the world again in "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull," and, yes, that's gray hair underneath his beat-up fedora.

In "Iron Man," Robert Downey Jr. flies across the ocean in a metal suit and, just as incredibly, demonstrates a superhero can be a 43-year-old guy with crow's feet.

All the fun stuff in "Sex and the City" -- the high heels, designer handbags, fancy cocktails and steamy passions -- is reserved for actresses of a certain age and income level.

Three of them are in their fabulous 40s (Sarah Jessica Parker, 43; Cynthia Nixon, 42, and Kristin Davis, 43) and Kim Cattrall is fit and foxy at 51.

As summer trends go, gray is definitely the new black. Or put another way, older is the new hip.

Maturity is a lucrative commodity, according to the latest box office numbers. "Sex and the City" earned \$55.7 million this weekend, the biggest debut ever for a romantic comedy. "Indiana Jones" and "Iron Man" are the first two films to make more than \$200 million this year.

For Deb Jakub, a 55-year-old mother of two from Grosse Pointe Farms, it's nice to see actors 40 and older -- especially the "Sex and the City" cast -- strut their stuff on the big screen.

"I do really like that they're still stars, still sexy," says Jakub. "They're celebrating where they are at that age."



GET HIP TO WHAT'S HOT

Read Barbara Walters' memoir, "Audition" (Knopf, \$29.95). The broadcast legend, who's in her 70s, spills juicy details about her stellar career and star-crossed romances.

Listen to Neil Diamond's "Home Before Dark" (Sony, \$13.97), his first chart-topping album ever. It received a boost from his appearance as an "American Idol" mentor.

Rent "Charlie Wilson's War," the true-life story of a congressman's covert dealings in Afghanistan, starring Tom Hanks, 51, and spring chicken Julia Roberts, 40.

Watch "She's Got the Look" (10 p.m. Wednesday, TV Land), a reality show where women 35 and older compete to become a supermodel. America's Next Top Cougar?

Get ready for "Mamma Mia!" (opens July 18), a film version of the hit ABBA musical with Meryl Streep as a single mom trying to figure out who's the real father of the bride.

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Normally, life isn't a party for either performers or audiences who've grown out of the 18-to-34 demographic. Once you turn 40, you're no longer the ideal consumer for movie moguls or TV executives. Instead, you're someone who's invisible to, or, at the very least, underserved by the entertainment industry.

But as is their habit, the baby boomers are changing those rules. Back in their youth, they fueled the emphasis on youth culture. Now, at 78 million strong, the generation born between 1946 and 1964 is showing its economic clout once again by redefining what's sexy and sellable in Hollywood.

"The three kinds of folks that the media and advertisers like are the young, the young and the young," says University of Detroit Mercy marketing professor Michael Bernacchi. "OK, wait a minute, what do we do with these 78 million folks? The answer is, at some point in time, the numbers don't lie -- their awesome spending, their awesome ability to change markets by spending. Because they're gray-haired now, do we tell them you don't count? If we tell them you don't count, guess what? The market doesn't count."

A boomer boom

Across the pop-culture spectrum, older celebrities are having a noteworthy summer. In the music arena, Neil Diamond recently scored his first No. 1 album after appearing as a mentor on "American Idol." Madonna, who turns 50 in August, is still showing club kids how it's done with her latest release, "Hard Candy." Tina Turner, 68, is getting ready for the launch of her first tour in several years this October.

In publishing, Barbara Walters has a best-seller with "Audition: A Memoir" (Knopf, \$29.95), where she describes her life in broadcast journalism (and drops bombshells like her secret affair with former Sen. Edward Brooke that would earn her a seat at the "Sex and the City" table).

On television, the king of all hosting, Regis Philbin, is back in prime time with "Million Dollar Password," which debuted Sunday on CBS. Another game show, "Celebrity Family Feud," helmed by cuddly boomer favorite Al Roker, kicks off July 1 on NBC.

This season also marks the return of several dramas led by 40-plus actresses, including Kyra Sedgwick's "The Closer" and Holly Hunter's "Saving Grace" (both July 14 on TNT). There's also a mini-wave of series set in eras that boomers love, like "Mad Men," the acclaimed AMC series about an ad agency in the 1960s, which returns July 27, and "Swingtown," a drama about suburban sexcapades in the 1970s that starts Thursday on CBS.

In the realm of reality TV, boomers are the target audience for "She's Got the Look," a supermodel search for women 35 and older that begins Wednesday on TV Land. It's one of many original programs the network is running in an effort to court viewers in their 40s and 50s.

TV Land, which started out as a channel for classic TV reruns, has boosted its ratings recently with reality shows like "The Big 4-0" and "High School Reunion." According to the network, the goal is to "super-serve" boomers and focus on their needs as intently as MTV does for younger viewers.

"A lot of other entertainment entities, broadcast and cable, might deliver a fortysomething audience, but they're not creating shows specifically for them," says TV Land president Larry Jones. "In that sense, we think we have a really unique position and opportunity."

Another display of boomer clout is the "Cougars for Cook" movement that's gotten some credit for helping David Cook win "American Idol" by a whopping 12 million votes.

Cook, 25, reportedly received more support from older women than his rival, 17-year-old David Archuleta. A poster in the "Idol" audience reading "Cougars 4 Cook" became part of the buzz, since cougar, a nickname for older women who date younger men, has now become synonymous with active, affluent women over 40.

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But a better example of the power wielded by older female consumers is "Sex and the City," which made the biggest box-office debut for a romantic comedy ever.

"I really think marketers anywhere, in any industry, are doing an enormous disservice to themselves in not looking at this group of women," says Fara Warner, author of "The Power of the Purse: How Smart Companies are Adapting to the World's Most Important Consumers -- Women" (Prentice Hall, \$29.99).

"These are the women who are going to be buying a Cadillac or a Mercedes-Benz or a Jag," continues Warner, a visiting professor of journalism at the University of Michigan school of communication studies. "They're the ones who can afford to go out for a great evening and spend two or three hundred dollars on a restaurant and drinks. They're the kind of women who are probably going to be doing 'Sex and the City' parties."

Aging allowed

Movies like "Sex and the City" and "Indiana Jones" and "Iron Man" give their stars a chance to play their own age, something rare for action films

The significant thing about Ford's current turn as Indiana Jones is "he's being allowed to play a 65-year-old," says Bill Newcott, entertainment editor of AARP The Magazine. "If that movie were made 20 years ago, it would be 65-year-old Harrison Ford still trying to play 45-year-old Harrison Ford."

In "Iron Man," Downey does something just as revolutionary by balancing comic book heroics with an undercurrent of middle-age angst.

"Here he is at midlife, and he's made his mistakes and he doesn't see any point in turning himself around. And then these cataclysmic events come and he remakes himself. That's a great superhero story but it also has a real resonance with people who are in midlife," says Newcott.

After a summer like this, Hollywood risk-takers may be more willing to cast older actors and make more movies for mature audiences, says Maddy Dychtwald, cofounder of Age Wave, a consulting firm on the business, social and cultural implications of aging that's based in San Francisco.

"We're seeing a transformation," says Dychtwald. "We're still in the middle of it, so it's hard to see. ... We're beginning to see, oh yeah, there is life after 40 or 50 or 60. And you know, it's pretty damn good."

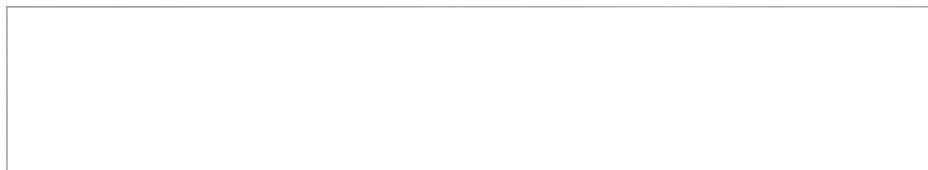
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