

Steven Zeitchik

## film reporter

## Tough to build a franchise, tougher to build a new one

**N**EW YORK — Whenever a studio talks about creating a new franchise, I always think of the joke about the studio that has hit hard times and decides to call in a consultant. Executives turn over everything — financials, marketing plans, scripts. After weeks of analysis, the consultant says: "I've identified your problem. Stop releasing flops and only release blockbusters."

No matter how much a studio might want a franchise, that doesn't mean they can have one. A movie can't be called a franchise until after the first one becomes a hit. And sometimes not even then; just because you copy a success doesn't mean you'll produce another one. As Discovery Films' Andrea Meditch says, "People always tell me they have the next 'March of the Penguins.' But the next 'Penguins' won't look anything like that movie."

If that's true on the documentary side, it's doubly true on big-budget features. Unless it has the qualities of a "Harry Potter" or "Lord of the Rings" — buckets of fans, source material, a serial structure — no amount of wishing can will a franchise into existence.

Of course, studios still want franchises just like children want candy, and for similar reasons: They're familiar and they provide a reliable rush. This creates a rather unavoidable problem. If you want a franchise but don't know if you can get one until after you've spent \$150 million, you're in a bind. You either don't do them or you risk a mint trying.

This conundrum of pursuing a franchise where it's unclear one exists — call it the Matrix Dilemma — explains why so many studios resurrect old (read: actual) franchises. There's no guarantee these movies will spawn sequels either, but the story lines made money at some point, and that increases the odds considerably. So enter James Bond in 2006, John McClane in the summer or Indiana Jones and Speed Racer this summer. (Michel Gondry's upcoming "Be Kind Rewind" smartly skewers remake culture when video store employees re-create '80s comedies like "Ghostbusters" and customers prefer the low-budget remakes.)

But something more ambitious is on the minds of a few studios at the moment: the creation of a new franchise.

Paramount has taken a bet on the children's book series "The Spiderwick Chronicles," which it is releasing today. It's the same day Fox is putting out Doug Liman's teleportation pic "Jumper." Although marketing departments are wisely not billing either of these films as franchises, that's basically the goal. At the "Jumper" premiere this week, one wag wondered why instead of the unresolved ending, the studio didn't just swap in the trailer for "Jumper 2."

Fox chief Tom Rothman encapsulated the higher stakes. "Jumper" is an original; it's not like other tentpoles," he says. "There's something challenging and rewarding (about that)." The challenge is hard to argue with. Failed attempts litter past slates. Remember Val Kilmer's "The Saint"? Exactly. And "The Golden Compass" proves that a set of popular books and epic action don't always make a franchise. Sometimes they just make a more expensive dud.

But give credit to those who try for taking the long view. Old franchises are by definition self-cannibalizing; you can only extend or revive one for so long before you run out, or end up with a "He-Man" remake.

In the meantime, studios will continue the revivals until there's nothing left, or enough time has passed for a new one. Twenty years from now, a producer will try to remake "Transformers." And someone will say, "Why do you have to tinker with a classic? The 2007 version was perfect."

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## Moretti makes noise over attack on his 'Quiet Chaos'

### Calls Catholic bishops 'ignorant'

By Eric J. Lyman

**R**OME — Nanni Moretti struck back at his detractors Wednesday, blaming "ignorance" for motivating attacks on his candid sex scene with co-star Isabella Ferrari in the new film "Quiet Chaos."

The film, which opened last week in Italy and immediately topped the boxoffice charts, also is in competition at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Although Moretti is probably best known as a director, his credits for "Chaos" are for writing and acting, and it's the acting role that's causing the controversy.

Some of the most visible criticisms came from the Catholic newspaper Christian Family, which has editorialized against the film, and the Italian Conference of Bishops, which wrote an open letter criticizing it.

"Coming from such a coura-



Moretti



Ferrari

geous and talented and idealistic director like Moretti and such a delicate and sensitive face like Ferrari, I would have expected a more romantic, tender or loving moment open to life, perhaps leading to a child," said the letter, written by Nicolo Anselmi, the bishop conference's youth program director. Anselmi went on to call the scene "vulgar" and "disturbing." One of the offending scenes features the protagonists having sex, standing, fully clothed, and seemingly detached from each other.

See **MORETTI** on page 32

## 'Baby' boom: Six join indie pic

By Gregg Goldstein

**N**EW YORK — Jerry O'Connell, Heather Graham, John Corbett, Katie Finneran, Ian Ziering and Lara Flynn Boyle will join forces for the indie romantic comedy "Baby on Board."

Brian Herzlinger's indie feature follows a happily married couple (O'Connell, Graham) whose lives and high-powered



Graham



Corbett

careers are thrown into chaos thanks to an unplanned pregnancy. Corbett and Finneran play their best friends, a bitter couple whose misguided advice on parenting and marriage only makes

See **"BABY"** on page 32

## Kassan duties grow in Par group

By Carly Mayberry

Adam Kassan has been promoted to vp at Paramount Film Group.

Kassan, who has served as Paramount Vantage's director of creative affairs since 2006, will oversee the daily creative affairs, production, acquisitions, marketing and publicity activities for Paramount Film Group as well as Vantage.

He will report to new Paramount Film Group presi-

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Kassan

# 'SOP'

**B**ERLIN — Errol Morris looks at the abuse and torture of prisoners by U.S. soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad with a peculiar fixation in "Standard Operating Procedure." The scandal, of course, came to light in 2004 through photographs taken by the Army members who served as prison wardens.

In his documentary, which screened in competition, Morris focuses with near-pornographic obsession on how those photos were taken, by whom and for what purpose. The wider context of the war on terrorism, the Bush administration's complicity in prisoner abuse, the moral and legal implications and the damage the scandal did to U.S. prestige worldwide is not even mentioned.

Such subject matter was never going to find a wide audience, especially theatrically. But this Sony Pictures Classics release faces another challenge: A much more encompassing film, Rory Kennedy's "Ghosts of Abu Ghraib," made a year earlier for HBO, covered the identical territory — even to the point of duplicating some interviews — and did explore the context of the scandal.

Morris draws on three sources



**Berlin International Film Festival**  
*the bottom line*  
 Errol Morris' docu about the Abu Ghraib prison scandal is too narrowly focused.

for his film: The photos of Iraqi detainees being physically abused, sexually humiliated and in one instance the body of a prisoner evidently tortured to death; interviews with the soldiers who took the photos or appeared in them; and recreated scenes with actors portraying events surrounding the infamous photographic sessions.

Where in Kennedy's docu the soldiers wondered in amazement how they ever got involved in such appalling behavior,

Morris' questions put them on the defensive. They point fingers, the women blame the men, the photographers insist they only wanted to document the abuse, and everyone keeps saying they never really hurt anyone. In truth, daily shelling of the prison by insurgents and constant threats of violence by prisoners did create an extremely unhealthy psychological state where illegal orders were obeyed promptly.

Morris' interviews rarely rise above the level of sergeants. He did get on camera Janis Karpinski, who as commander of the military prison brigade in Iraq was a central figure of the scandal, and she doesn't mince words. But the film never follows up on her allegations. She mentions that the military intelligence interrogators answered

stirred at the expense of coverage of weightier issues.

The film was given the equivalent of a "G" rating in Italy, though the posters "advise" cinemas not to let anyone under the age of 12 to view the film if unaccompanied by an adult.

The film, which grossed \$2.2 million during its opening weekend, tells the story of a television executive who watches the world from a park bench after becoming a widower. It had its international premiere Wednesday in Berlin.

The controversy seems to have helped the film, which, according to producers, has already sold to distributors in 12 territories. ■

to a Gen. Miller, but the film never explains that this is Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, formerly head of prison operations at Guantanamo Bay, who was ordered by U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to bring his methods to Abu Ghraib.

Instead, Morris keeps returning again and again to those photos and in one instance a video and the time frames in which they were taken. It seems like Morris — no pun intended — misses the bigger picture.

The film does make a solid point that in at least one instance an Iraqi who was willing to cooperate and give information shut up forever following his humiliation. A soldier relates that one detainee in this purgatory was a mere taxi driver caught up in a sweep of adult males by the U.S. military.

The restaging of the events surrounding these humiliations is in questionable taste, though. What purpose does it serve for actors to re-create these incidents when we already have such strong photographic proof? These sequences, often tricked out with elaborate slow motion, a few optical effects



**Errol Morris' docu focuses on the U.S.' treatment of enemy prisoners.**

and Danny Elfman's overwrought musical score, put a Hollywood gloss on "SOP" that ill befits its subject.

The interviews are the most impressive element of the film. Despite the pain and shattered lives, these soldiers are willing to face the camera — and themselves — to try to make sense out of completely senseless actions that never advanced the American cause in Iraq. This is the real value of "SOP."

## STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE

Sony Pictures Classics  
Participant Prods.

**Credits:** Screenwriter-director: Errol Morris; Producers: Julie Ahlberg, Errol Morris; Directors of photography: Robert Chappell, Robert Richardson; Music: Danny Elfman; Editor: Andy Grieve.

MPAA rating R, running time 121 minutes.

## Moretti

*Continued from page 4—*

Moretti, a five-time nominee for the Cannes' Palme d'Or, struck back Wednesday, saying the letter was its own worst critic.

"Obviously, the priest is not a film expert and, from what he said, it seems obvious he did not even see the film," the prickly Moretti said, adding that most of the criticisms were groundless. "The priest's letter speaks for itself."

Other media criticized the amount of time television news has dedicated to reporting on the scene and the controversy it has

## 'Baby'

*Continued from page 4—*

things worse.

Flynn Boyle plays Graham's overdemanding ad agency boss. Ziering plays a gay obstetrician and Graham's confidante.

A Plus Prods. and Big Shoot Prods. are backing the project,

with A Plus' Emilio Ferrari ("I Know What You Did Last Winter") producing and Big Shoot's Russell Scalise executive producing. Scalise penned the screenplay with Michael Wright.

The five-week shoot is set to begin Tuesday in Chicago. Ferrari's Entertainment Seven has worldwide distribution rights. ■

## Kassan

*Continued from page 4—*

dent John Lesher, who worked with Kassan at Vantage.

At Vantage, Kassan worked on the critically acclaimed films "Babel," "An Inconvenient Truth," "Into the Wild," "No

Country for Old Men" and "There Will Be Blood." He joined the studio's specialty film division in 2005.

Before joining Paramount, Kassan worked at Brad Pitt's production company, Plan B Entertainment, for two years. He began his career in entertainment at Miramax. ■

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