



Life

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Escaping 'R' bondage

A PG-13 rating looks golden for latest 007 film

By Josh Chetwynd
USA TODAY

James Bond has X-ray glasses and a missile-firing BMW in *The World Is Not Enough*, but the device that earned 007's new movie its record-breaking crowds was its PG-13 rating.

The action picture placed No. 1 at the box office this weekend, grossing an estimated \$37.2 million — the largest opening in MGM's history. It is the fourth consecutive Bond movie to be rated PG-13, and that's no accident.

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"It is a very intentional thing," says Larry Gleason,

MGM's president of worldwide distribution. "If there was ever a statement of the strength of PG-13, it is this movie. Sixty percent of our male audience was under 25. We are getting a very young audience. (They) have to be credited for our increased business."

Over the past decade, PG-13 has become almost essential for big-time box office success. Since PG-13 was created in July 1984, 21 films have grossed more than \$200 million. Thirteen of those mega-blockbusters were PG-13 — 10 more than R or PG, the ratings that tied for second on the list.

The reason: "PG-13" signals that the movie isn't kiddie fare — but anyone can get in. Adopted in response to vio-



By Keith Hamshere, MGM

Rated PG-13: Elektra King (Sophie Marceau) is all over James Bond (Pierce Brosnan) in 'The World Is Not Enough,' the fourth Bond film to earn the lucrative rating.

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lence in the PG-rated *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Gremlins*, PG-13 comes with this advisory: "Parents strongly cautioned — some material may be inappropriate for children under 13." But parents are not required to accompany their kids — unlike R-rated movies, which those under 17 are not allowed to attend unless accompanied by an adult.

That means a bigger pool of viewers from the get-go.

COVER STORY

R rating," says Gary Barber of Spyglass Entertainment, which co-financed the PG-13 *The Sixth Sense*. "PG-13 opens up a vast audience — especially in the American heartland."

That is particularly important today because the National Association of Theater Owners in June said it would crack down on teens sneaking into R-rated movies by requiring identification.

A PG rating also can be toxic to a film because it's perceived by many moviegoing teens as being less mature than a PG-13.

"I'm 16, and I don't see PG films anymore," says Alex Lerehen of Fairfield, Conn. "They are for younger audiences. They are usually, like, childhood stories."

"I'm a parent of four, and my children want to see something that they will enjoy and that they can say to their peers, 'I saw this movie,'" says producer Steve Stabler, who has done such PG-13 films as *Bats* and *Dumb and Dumber*. "It impresses their friends a lot more when they've seen a PG-13 movie as opposed to a PG film."

Yet it's hard to define what will get a PG-13 rating. The Motion Picture Association of America's ratings board does not have a specific policy on which types of films will receive

which ratings. Though PG-13 usually means less nudity, violence and foul language than an R, the content varies with the tastes and tolerances of the board, made up of a rotating group of eight to 13 parents.

It shows. *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Jurassic Park*, *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, *Dirty Dancing* and *Twister* have all earned the PG-13 rating.

Figuring out how to get a PG-13 can prove vital to studios for reasons other than getting young fans into theaters. Most notably: corporate tie-ins. Studios can defray marketing costs by teaming with an outside company for a cross-promotional media blitz. But many companies shy away from R-rated films.

The new Bond has ties with BMW and Omega watches, among others. And MGM has a comprehensive pact to advertise *The World Is Not Enough* worldwide on MTV — a deal that would have been extremely difficult had the film been rated R.

"It is rare for an R-rated film to get corporate involvement, says Universal marketing chief Marc Shmuger. "If that becomes an essential component of the marketing, then the need to have a more toned-down rating becomes heightened."

Aware of what's at stake, studios are making sure that, whenever possible, their most commercial prospects turn out PG-13. For years, filmmakers signed contracts promising their movies would get at least

As part of his deal, director Sam Raimi, for example, had to make sure that *For Love of the Game* wasn't going to be R-rated. Filmmaker Peter Jackson, now shooting the three *Lord of the Rings* films, is obligated to do the same.

Even when there isn't a binding mandate, industry players aim for PG-13. Filmmakers often pre-emptively cut scenes the MPAA board might find objectionable, and a rating can always be appealed.

Last week, for instance, actor Kirk Douglas personally persuaded the board to switch his upcoming film, *Diamonds* (opening Dec. 10), from an R to a PG-13. Douglas and the movie's distributor, Miramax, argued that the comedy, which has no violence or nudity but does have sexual content and drug use, shouldn't have a restricted rating.

For some, Hollywood's PG-13 efforts are unsettling.

After the high school shootings in Littleton, Colo., President Clinton railed against PG-13, putting out a statement that asked the movie industry to "re-evaluate its ratings system, with a specific focus on the PG-13 rating."

"When a movie is labeled PG-13, parents should not have to worry about their teenagers watching it," the Clinton statement said. "Yet many of these movies contain gratuitous and graphic violence — violence of the kind that parents want to and properly should know about."

Other critics concur. Joe Zanger, managing editor of *PG-14*, an online newsletter run by parents and teachers that reports on movie content, believes that PG-13 should be abolished and that studios should have to choose between PG and R.

"PG-13 was designed, I believe, to apply the friendly PG symbol to movies that have no business even being considered for viewing by most young teenagers and preteens," he says. "The age assignment for the rating is deceptive, and it lulls parents into a false sense of security."

Zanger points to the PG-13 Martin Lawrence comedy *Blue Streak* as "an R-rated film that slipped through the system."

"It was almost wall-to-wall violence, with two coldblooded, premeditated murders central to the plot," he says. "In addition, the bad guy got away with the crime."

There are no plans to alter the ratings system, MPAA chairman Jack Valenti says. The organization did announce last week that language explaining why a film received its rating will appear on all print advertising beginning next year.

In defending the ratings, Valenti points to an Opinion Research Corp. poll that says 76% of parents with children under age 13 found the ratings to be "very useful" to "fairly useful."

Valenti acknowledges that the criteria for PG-13 have become more lenient. But he believes that's a function of current culture, not an effort by the ratings board to be more permissive. "The society isn't what it used to be. The worst thing that can happen in a democracy is rigidity — an unwillingness to change. The same can be said for the ratings system."

PG-13 rating and the blockbusters

PG-13 dominates the list of films grossing more than \$200 million:

- 1 *Titanic* (PG-13) — \$600.8 million
- 2 *Star Wars, Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (PG) — \$427.7 million
- 3 *Jurassic Park* (PG-13) — \$357.1 million
- 4 *Forrest Gump* (PG-13) — \$329.7 million
- 5 *The Lion King* (G) — \$312.9 million
- 6 *Independence Day* (PG-13) — \$306.2 million
- 7 *Home Alone* (PG) — \$285.8 million
- 8 *The Sixth Sense* (PG-13) — \$270.1 million
- 9 *Batman* (PG-13) — \$251.2 million
- 10 *Men in Black* (PG-13) — \$250.7 million
- 11 *Twister* (PG-13) — \$241.7 million
- 12 *Beverly Hills Cop* (R) — \$234.8 million
- 13 *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (PG-13) — \$229.1 million
- 14 *Mrs. Doubtfire* (PG-13) — \$219.2 million
- 15 *Ghost* (PG-13) — \$217.6 million
- 16 *Aladdin* (G) — \$217.4 million
- 17 *Saving Private Ryan* (R) — \$216.2 million
- 18 *Back to the Future* (PG) — \$208.2 million
- 19 *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (PG-13) — \$205.4 million
- 20 *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (R) — \$204.8 million
- 21 *Armageddon* (PG-13) — \$201.8 million

Source: MPAA; ACNielsen EDI

an R rating. The concern was that a film rated NC-17 (the rating that replaced X) could not make money because no one under 17 may be admitted — even with a parent. Now contracts often are written to ensure that a movie comes in with a rating no more restrictive than PG-13.