

THEY STILL SHOOT HORSE



'Flicka,' 'Stormbreaker' and other live-action family films take on animated kids' flicks

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Live-action family films used to be a staple of Hollywood. Vehicles used to be built around child stars like Shirley Temple and Freddie Bartholomew. Disney made a mint by offering fun, entertaining movies like "Swiss Family Robinson" and "Old Yeller." Lassie and Rin Tin Tin were big stars. And the films they appeared in were enjoyed by the whole family.

Nowadays, most family films fall into two categories: big-budget animated fare like the Pixar offerings (such as "Cars" and "The Incredibles") or this past weekend's No. 1 hit "Open Season," or huge-budget franchises like the "Harry Potter" and now "Chronicles of Narnia" series.

This Friday, "Alex Rider: Operation Stormbreaker" — the story of a teenage James Bond-like hero — hopes to buck the trend, as does "Flicka," a family film about a girl and her horse, on Oct. 20.

And in December, "Charlotte's Web," with Dakota Fanning, and "Eragon" will try to wow 'em during the holiday.

"My hope for the movie was that this was a movie that parents could take their kids to," says Anthony Horowitz, who penned the best-selling Alex Rider books and wrote the script for the film, which stars Alex Pettyfer in the title role, along with Ewan McGregor, Bill Nighy and Alicia Silverstone.

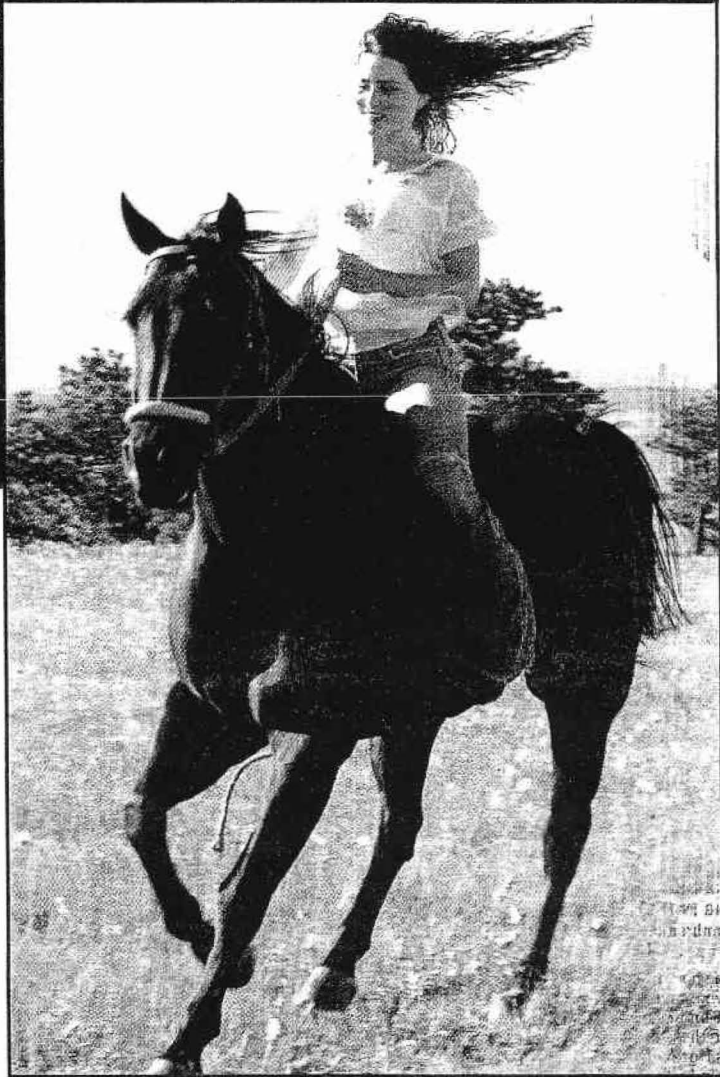
"That's what I was really aiming for when I wrote the screenplay. I'm a dad, and I've taken my children to so many films that made me squirm with embarrassment when my kids were smaller. The idea was. Here is a family film that the whole family can see. But does that actually happen anymore?"

A good question — do families go to movies together anymore? Increasingly, they take one of two options: either the family splits up at the multiplex, with the parents seeing one movie,



teenagers another and little kids a third, or they take their 8-year-old along to see PG-13-rated fare like "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest" or "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby," a PG-13 movie that included jokes and situations some parents might have been uncomfortable with.

Film critic and historian Leonard Maltin sees the disappearance of the



FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS Family films, like the upcoming "Charlotte's Web" (top l.), "Flicka" (above) and "Lassie" (l.), often tap that old fave, animal tales, to corral viewers.

classic family film as a real loss.

"It's very hard nowadays," says Maltin, famed for his authoritative best-selling "Movie Guide." "Everyone seems to agree what is appropriate for preschoolers. You get very gentle, positive, proactive children's entertainment, whether it's Barney or Baby Einstein or whatever. But from age 6 up, apparently, it's no holds barred. The audience that Walt Disney cultivated and virtually owned for decades still exists. But it's being fragmented and confused by the marketplace."

Some film companies and movie studio see family films as an untapped niche: Walden Media, for example — creators of the soon-to-be-sequeled "Chronicles of Narnia" — have made "Holes," "Hoot" and "How to Eat Fried Worms." But family

films without "Talladega"-like "edginess" are ignored. This fall's gentle remake of "Lassie" barely made a ripple.

"I was discouraged to see that the new 'Lassie' movie was just thrown away," says Maltin. "It barely surfaced. I didn't even get invited to a press screening of it."

For "Operation Stormbreaker," the origins lie in the hit series of books, which have a huge young male fan base rooting for the 14-year-old hero who has to get by on his wits in an adult world.

"We had one studio that wanted to make the picture but only if we made Alex 18 and gave him a car and a girl," laughs Horowitz, who has also created the hit TV mystery series "Foyle's War."

But can family films work today? Or would "Old Yeller" be put out of his misery

Audiences for kids' films are 'fragmented and confused.'

MOVIES, DON'T THEY?



HANG IN THERE "Alex Rider: Operation Stormbreaker" is based on a book series.



DOG TEAM TO BEAT The adventure "Eight Below," with Paul Walker, was a hit this year.



WADDLE 'N' WIGGLE "March of the Penguins" was beloved; "Fried Worms" wasn't.

at the box office by "Spider-Man"? Maybe, says Horowitz.

"Families naturally are gravitating toward these huge blockbuster movies," says Horowitz. "The movie of the summer in Britain was without any question 'Pirates of the Caribbean 2,' despite a critical response that could have floored it, frankly — [but] made not a bit of difference to its box-office success. It was a tidal wave that to some extent took some of our [overseas] audience with it as well." ("Operation Stormbreaker" has already opened in the U.K.)

Just as disturbing to Maltin is how the desire to reach the broadest audience possible makes studios turn R-rated movies into "hard" PG-13 films and avoid a G-rating at all costs. But he takes solace in the success of movies like "March of the Penguins," and the response he sees to classic entertainments.

"There's an annual silent-movie event in L.A., and a lot of families come to see Charlie Chaplin or Harold Lloyd or Buster Keaton with a live orchestra," says Maltin. "Most of the kids have never seen a silent before. I'm sure. And to hear the kids' laughter — the highest-pitched laughter — above the crowd is heartening. It says these films still work." ♦

They are family — sort of

A glance at the top-grossing movies of 2006 finds a lot of movies that families watched together — but were they appropriate for everyone? Here's a rundown of recent films and the issues they raise. M.G.

"PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: DEAD MAN'S CHEST"

Kids loved Johnny Depp's goofy hero (right) and the silly stunts. Adults dug the ironic tone and special effects. But this PG-13 film still had some intense violence that made younger kids shiver their timbers.

"X-MEN: THE LAST STAND"

The finale to the comic-book franchise included all sorts of mayhem, including the traumatic deaths of beloved main characters. Teenagers got into it, but younger comics fans saw the difference between on-the-page and movie violence.

"TALLADEGA NIGHTS: THE BALLAD OF RICKY BOBBY"

Another family favorite, thanks to the goofy Will Ferrell, who comes off



as the silly older brother everyone wishes they had. But this movie had a lot of sexual innuendo. "Elf," it sure wasn't.

"THE BENCHWARMERS"

This Rob Schneider vehicle about nerds getting revenge when they finally get to play baseball is filled with family-friendly content: It's all about teamwork and giving everyone a chance. If Disney had made it, it could've been G-rated. But the studio wanted to make sure Schneider's fans turned up, so they made a cruder PG-13 film.

"EIGHT BELOW"

Disney's dogs-in-peril adventure had a classic feel and scored well at the box office. It earned a strong \$81 million despite a "soft" PG (because the dogs were in peril and for some mild language). But it proves a family film can succeed, and tell a cool tale to boot.

"SUPERMAN RETURNS" A kid-friendly hero in a flashy revamp, but intense scenes with Lex Luthor made it much too dark.