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I Love You With All My Hype

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LOS ANGELES



Everett Collection

Gene Kelly and Jean Hagen in
"Singin' in the Rain."

THEY smooch and hug as cameras snap. Friends enthusiastically report: "It's true! They're smitten!" Their publicists confirm it is the real deal. But when celebrity magazines asked the public to weigh in on the latest high-octane Hollywood pairing - Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes, the former star of "Dawson's Creek" - the cynics crushed the dewy-eyed. "Publicity stunt," said 62 percent of respondents to a People magazine's poll. "P.R.," echoed 65 of 100 people questioned at random by Us Weekly at Rockefeller Center.

Mr. Cruise and Ms. Holmes may very well be head over heels, but they should not be surprised that even the most star-struck fan seems

to be having trouble embracing their romance, say chroniclers of Hollywood and others who cover or work in the entertainment industry. Through all the changes that have swept Hollywood over the years, one thing still endures: strategic love.

The coupling of stars to create ballyhoo for a movie, burnish an actor's image, create a name or distract attention from other relationships may not be as common as when the movie studios tightly controlled stars' careers through the 1950's, some publicists and film industry experts assert. But it is still the easiest way to grab flattering publicity.

And when it comes to celebrity news, it hardly gets any bigger than a love connection involving a superstar like Mr. Cruise. After appearing together in public for the first time late last month, cuddling and smooching at a film awards ceremony in Italy, the instant couple - they had met only weeks earlier - made the covers of the Big Three: *Us Weekly*, *Star* and *People*. The articles mentioned that each had a film coming out shortly: "The War of the Worlds" for Mr. Cruise and "Batman Begins" for Ms. Holmes.

That coincidence, along with the flood of details about the liaison that emerged in the celebrity magazines - Mr. Cruise, 42, had phoned Ms. Holmes, 26, out of the blue; on their first date he served her sushi in his private jet cruising over Los Angeles - has fanned the skepticism of an audience schooled to expect secretiveness from trysting stars, not to mention celebrities who stage reality television shows to hype themselves.

"Katie Holmes and Tom Cruise is sudden and strange," said Janice Min, the editor in chief of *US Weekly*. "But I do think it is real, and I've had people in the office laugh at me."

Even if today's savvy fan may smell a rat, the temptation of being in the know is hard to resist. In the cases of outright romantic convenience, said Stephen M. Silverman, a biographer of film directors who is the news editor of People.com, the Web site of *People* magazine, "the basis for doing it remains the same, to get

publicity. But today you have the extra added attraction that the public is celebrity crazy, whether it's with cynicism or adoration."

Romance, Mr. Silverman said, usually trumps almost any other private endeavor as news. "Angelina Jolie is doing serious humanitarian work," he said, "but the Brad Pitt connection gets more coverage. I go to dinner parties with very sophisticated people and they say, 'So, what's going on with Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt?' "

Chris Doherty, the president of INF, a photo agency in New York that handles paparazzi and celebrity event photographers, said that with the high number of outlets vying for images, stars seeking publicity no longer need to appear at official events; a couple can just walk down a street holding hands. "If they want it to happen," he said, "it's not that difficult."

Whether the coupling is real or fake, Mr. Doherty said, is difficult to judge. Publications often ask "the circumstances under which the pictures were taken," he said. "Did it look like they were acting? They'll ask us if they saw the photographer. If they didn't see the photographer, you can pretty much read into that that the pictures were candid."

But, he said, in the case of hot couples like Mr. Pitt and Ms. Jolie, any questioning is almost irrelevant. "Everybody wanted a picture after his breakup with Jennifer Aniston," Mr. Doherty said.

Phony pairings, film historians say, used to be concocted by studios to promote a movie. In the days of the studio system for example, the publicity machine often helped convince fans that stars appearing on screen together were an item. The movie "Singin' in the Rain" spoofed this, by having the actress believe the publicity even though her ardent on screen partner loathed her. In other cases, phony pairings were arranged to mask a secret, perhaps adulterous, affair, and, in cases like that of Rock Hudson, to hide homosexuality. Tab Hunter, a heartthrob in the 1950's, said he was a frequent companion of Natalie Wood at the request of Warner Brothers, which had both stars under contract. They would attend parties to promote films like

"The Burning Hills" even though he was gay - not publicly at the time - and she was still in her teens, he said.

"Once the machine got rolling, it was quite powerful, and the press carries it one step beyond," he said in an interview last week. "They reported it every way: 'Natalie is in love,' 'Natalie has lots of boyfriends, and Tab is No. 1.' All that nonsense. She really loved R. J. Wagner."

Mr. Hunter, who at 73 plans to release an autobiography this fall, "Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making of a Movie Star," in which he talks about his homosexuality and romance with Anthony Perkins, said he went along with the stunts because he considered it part of his job.

Today celebrities are responsible for marketing themselves and some go further than others in using their personal life as headline fodder.

"You have a lot of people," said one Hollywood publicist, who spoke on condition of anonymity to protect the privacy of his clients, "who think it's a good thing to be on the cover of these magazines, and the healthiest way to do that is romance. You don't want to be on the cover for a criminal act or a divorce."

But other publicists insisted they would never seek to draw attention to a client's personal life. Once you open that door, one publicist said, "you can't get that privacy back."

Exposure does not come without risks. With more news media competition, there is less control over coverage or ability to protect the stars as the studios once did, some film experts say.

Take Ms. Holmes. Three weeks ago pictures showed her radiant and beautifully styled with Mr. Cruise in Rome. Last week the tabloids and glossies showed her in unflattering close-ups with a skin rash around her mouth. ("Katie's Lip Malfunction," read the US Weekly headline.)

Celebrities these days also risk reaching a point of saturation with the public just as fast as the romance. "There are very few secrets anymore," said A. Scott Berg, who has written books about Katharine Hepburn and the studio mogul Samuel Goldwyn.

In the old days "the audience never got tired of the star," he said. Or at least it took a lot longer. "Clark Gable seemed fascinating all his life because there wasn't so much information about him," said Mr. Berg, who has won the Pulitzer Prize for biography. "Today you're on television all the time."

Movie studios are not crazy about overexposed, off-screen couplings, said Peter Sealey, a former president for marketing and distribution for Columbia Pictures, who is an adjunct professor at the University of California, Berkeley. He said love relationships do not significantly affect ticket sales and can interfere with the suspension of disbelief that is still the goal for most movies.

"If you co-mingle external reality and fantasy, fantasy loses," he said, citing the relentless stories about Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck preceding the release of their movie "Gigli," which flopped.

Mr. Sealey said that while stars may personally benefit from the higher profile a new love may bring - staged or otherwise - movies live or die on word of mouth, and "you want the focus on the movie."

"You got to see it," he said, should be the response of the audiences, and not, "'They seem to be happy together.'"

A lot of stars do fall in love on the set, making for such legendary pairings as Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, and Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. "You have beautiful people who have libidos and are off on location for months at a time," Mr. Sealey said. "What do you think is going to happen?"

And some improbable relationships - Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore - seem to pan out as well. But Mr. Cruise and Ms. Holmes seem to have raised a number of red flags. In addition to their age

difference and seeming to have little in common - one report noted she had first been smitten when she saw "Risky Business" as a child - they seem to be chasing the paparazzi, instead of seeking privacy.

"Isn't romance a kind of exclusive focus on one person to the exclusion of the outside world?" asked Leo Braudy, the author of "The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History" and a professor of film history at the University of Southern California. "If you are carrying out your romance in public, there'll be some cynicism about your motives."

Publicists for the couple did not return calls, but in an interview with "Access Hollywood" scheduled to be broadcast tomorrow (with excerpts available on the show's Web site) Mr. Cruise, the former husband of Nicole Kidman, explained why he has been less inhibited than usual. "I'm not going to hide it," he said. "I am so happy, and I am not going to pretend or hide it or be shy. This woman is magnificent."

People may snicker, some noted, but they will still watch. "It doesn't mean that they don't want to see the pictures of them kissing," said Mr. Doherty, the photo agency executive. "It's all part of the show."