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ENTERTAINMENT

SLIGHT CLUB!

BRAD PITT TRIES TO DITCH HIS SHALLOW IMAGE IN THOUGHTFUL 'BABEL'

By REED TUCKER



MAKING A PITT STOP: Starring in "Babel" gives Brad a chance to prove he's got serious acting skills.

October 22, 2006 -- Brad Pitt has checked into rehab. And before you wonder what rock you've

been hiding under or why your beloved highlight-haired Perez has been keeping secrets from you, calm down. This is not the kind of rehab where you're bunking with Robin Williams or having group sharing sessions with Robert Downey Jr.

Yet this kind of rehab has no less of a storied history in Hollywood. It just involves fewer totaled convertibles.

Here's what happens:

1. Actor works his way up to becoming gigantic movie star.
2. Star takes roles in a string of big-budget crowd-pleasers, some of which flop.
3. Star's stock starts to fall faster than Enron.
4. In an attempt to get his mojo back, the now-not-so-gigantic star signs up for a smaller, well-regarded dramatic film by a cherished indie auteur.
5. Presto! Instant respect.

The time-tested strategy won an Oscar for Julia Roberts in "Erin Brockovich," resurrected John Travolta's career in "Pulp Fiction" and transformed Bill Murray from comedian to thespian in "Rushmore."

Pitt's shot at respectability comes Friday with "Babel," director Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's film composed of three subtly interlocking stories. In Japan, a deaf teen (Rinko Kikushi, see sidebar) longs to be accepted by her peers. In San Diego, a Mexican nanny (Adriana Barraza) is forced to take her two young charges over the border for a wedding. And in the desert of Morocco, an American tourist (Cate Blanchett) is accidentally shot by a shepherd boy testing a rifle, touching off a desperate search by her husband (Pitt) to find proper medical care.

The movie is quiet, thoughtful and character-driven - in short, about as anti-Hollywood as it gets. And maybe that's not such a bad thing for an actor who hasn't really asserted himself in a movie since 1999's "Fight Club."

"Spy Game" was limp, "Troy" completely bombed and "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" seemed to pull in the dollars based more on Pitt and Angelina Jolie's tabloid headlines than their acting skills. So now comes Brad's indie turn, and short of breaking down on "Oprah," this might be the best thing he could do for his career.

"This was a smart move on Brad's part to do a smaller-budgeted movie that shows him as a real actor instead of the bubble gum and kissy-face types of movies he's been doing," says media image consultant Michael Sands. "The material he has been choosing has not really displayed him as an acceptable actor. His movies really aren't selling. I like him as an actor, but he hasn't shown his craft. It seems like he's been doing it for the money."

And, Sands points out, that there's a disconnect between Pitt's film choices and who the public perceives this guy to be in real life.

"He's not an hombre. He's got compassion and kindness. He does all this charity work. He needs to forget about the glitz and the glamour, and do message movies," he says. "Otherwise, he'll continue to do these big blockbuster movies that have absolutely no message. I mean, what message does 'Mr. and Mrs. Smith' or 'Ocean's 11' have?"

"Babel" may not be a traditional message movie, but it does indirectly deal with issues such as the war on terrorism, xenophobia and even illegal immigration. And it does so in an intelligent,

humanistic manner, proving that Inarritu - hot off "21 Grams" and "Amores Perros" - is one of the go-to guys for touching and sometimes gritty slice-of-life drama.

For Pitt, he may just be the go-to guy for career resurrection, as well. "Babel" hasn't even been released yet, and already the director and his leading man have generated a considerable amount of early Oscar buzz. (Whether Pitt gets put up as leading or supporting actor remains to be seen.)

Angelina's man does seem to be moving in the right direction, but the rumors of him stepping into Tom Cruise's shoes in the "Mission: Impossible" franchise are troubling.

"Brad is not an action hero," Sands says. And playing follow-up to Tom Cruise is just the kind of thing that can land a fellow back in the worst kind of rehab - the Ben Affleck kind.