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The Biz: In Hollywood, Murder, Suicide Can Help Bring A Film To Life

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IT sounds like a plotline ripped from the pages of a Hollywood script: Star allegedly attempts suicide on the verge of the release of a film in which he plays a man who attempts suicide. But will that help or hurt the film's pr?

That is the scenario behind *Darjeeling Limited*, in which Owen Wilson plays a seemingly suicidal brother in a dysfunctional family. Strategists say Fox Searchlight's marketing prior to the film's release on Sept. 29 should focus on business as usual in spite of the actor's personal plight in which he was hospitalized last month after allegedly slashing his wrists. "The largest pr liability isn't exploitation. The studio will be tastefully conservative," said Sean Cassidy, president at agency DKC, New York. "It's that an A-list star might not do media, and if so they'll lose one of their best assets to promote it."

This is far from the only film to be affected by a prerelease nightmare. On-set deaths tainted *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983), when a helicopter accident took the lives of actor Vic Morrow and two child actors; and *The Crow* (1994), when Brandon Lee was accidentally shot and killed while filming a scene.

Waitress got unwanted—and unprecedented—press after writer/director/actress Adrienne Shelly was murdered last November. The publicity surrounding her death caused the indie film to receive much attention at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, where it was picked up by Fox Searchlight for \$4 million. Marketing for the tale of the unhappy small town diner waitress focused on uplifting Mother's Day promotions, pie recipes and gingham-decorated ads. *Waitress* has made \$18.8 million (to date).

"They weren't exploitative at all, but there was a media coverage uptick as a result of it," Cassidy said. "If drama is linked to the film, you have a layer above the obligatory coverage."

The producers of *Darjeeling* face a situation that isn't new but is always delicate for films without \$50 million marketing budgets. "Some of the trickiness comes in the tension between wanting attention and needing to be respectful," said Billy Warden, a pr strategist at Capstrat, Raleigh, N.C., and a former producer at E! "The fact is, attention is good for movies, especially relatively small movies like *Darjeeling* and *Waitress*. These kinds of productions can easily wind up flying below the radar of most moviegoers. Genuine breaking news pushes the product onto everyone's radar, which means many more people may go see it."

Films have also gained unexpected publicity—or distraction—when the private lives of its stars were contradictory to their on-screen roles. *Jersey Girl* (2004) was released during the time co-stars Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez were going through a tabloid-headlining breakup. *Six Days Seven Nights* (1998), a romantic comedy starring Harrison Ford and Anne Heche, was released as Heche was having a much-publicized relationship with Ellen DeGeneres. But *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (2005) got a pr boost when on-screen stars Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie became a real-life couple. And other films suffered from timing worse than Wilson's *Darjeeling*. Robert Redford's *The Last Castle*, for example, was deemed unpatriotic due to its use of an upside-down flag in marketing and posters just one month after 9/11.

Of course, not even unexpected and free publicity can save some films. "Jersey Girl

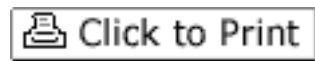
didn't tank because its stars were coupling. It tanked because it was dumb and not very entertaining or believable," said April Masini, an author and advice columnist (AskApril.com). "Darjeeling Limited will not do great business, but not because of Owen Wilson's attempted suicide problems. It will not do well because it's a small, quirky story and Wilson is not the star that Will Ferrell or Brad Pitt are."

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