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Remake of 'Lolita' Is Rebuffed by Distributors

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"Lolita" is getting a cold shoulder from Hollywood.

The \$50 million film — the second to be based on the Vladimir Nabokov novel about a middle-aged man's obsession with

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a 12-year-old girl — was completed more than a year ago by French conglomerate Chargeurs SA. But the filmmakers never lined up a distributor for the crucial U.S. market — and now they are having trouble finding a studio that will take on the controversial picture.

Chargeurs last year spun off its entertainment assets, including "Lolita," into a separate company, Pathe SA. To strike a deal in Hollywood, Pathe is counting on Jeffrey Berg, chairman of talent agency International Creative Management, which represents "Lolita" director Adrian Lyne. So far, Time Warner Inc.'s Warner Bros., Sony Corp.'s Sony Pictures, Viacom Inc.'s Paramount Pictures, News Corp.'s Fox and Seagram Co.'s Universal have all declined. The studios are worried not only about the film's risky subject but also about its risky economics.

Although the film has little nudity and got an R rating rather than the tougher NC-17, studio executives say they were

scared off by the pedophile theme, which is presented far more graphically than in the original 1962 "Lolita" starring James Mason and Sue Lyon. In the new film, Jeremy Irons plays the degenerate former college instructor Humbert Humbert; and unknown Dominique Swain, a 15-year-old high-school student from Malibu, Calif., plays the title role.

Hollywood is hardly skittish about movies with shocking sexual themes; currently in distribution are New Line Cinema's "Crash," a movie about people sexually aroused by car crashes, and "Kissed," the Samuel Goldwyn Co. release about a woman embalmer who has sex with male corpses. But "Lolita" is "a political hot potato," says Jonathan Dana, a film-marketing consultant. "Anything with sex with underage kids is the last taboo. People are afraid to touch it."

Indeed, Hollywood is under increasing attack from politicians who decry the increasingly graphic depiction of sex and violence in music, film and television. Last year, President Clinton signed the Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1996 which makes it illegal to depict a minor engaging in a sexual act. The wording of the law is broad enough that some think it could apply to "Lolita," but lawyers hired by the producers to vet this particular issue are satisfied the film falls within the bounds of

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decency.

The filmmakers also made some concessions. Mr. Lyne — known for such fare as "Fatal Attraction" — initially filmed one bedroom scene where Lolita, reading a comic book, chewing bubble gum and wearing only a pajama top, sits astride Mr. Irons while the actors simulate intercourse. A 19-year-old "body double" was used for parts of the scene. A spokeswoman for the movie says that the scene has been heavily edited and that the R rating was granted without any revisions or cuts.

Even those studios that aren't so concerned about issues of taste are leery about the movie's finances. Pathe has been seeking \$25 million for U.S. rights, but a studio would probably have to spend \$15 million to \$20 million to market and distribute the film. If it isn't a big box-office success, the studio would be hard pressed to get its money back, let alone make a profit.

Producing a film before lining up a distributor isn't unusual; many modestly budgeted independent films don't get distributors until they are shown at a film festival. But for a movie that costs as much to make as "Lolita," a producer usually presells rights, often by getting a Hollywood studio to put up some of the production costs in exchange for either domestic or foreign distribution rights. Critics say the producers of "Lolita" spent far too much for the film based on its potential audience, especially without a U.S. partner to share the risks.

The producers "made a \$50 million art film," says one studio executive who attended a screening. "Lolita" is "beautifully shot, well-acted and very disturbing," he says. But when art films work, he adds, they typically earn \$30 million to \$35 million at the box office.

People familiar with the production say the original budget was in the \$40 million neighborhood but grew to more than \$50 million before shooting was finished and has now climbed to \$65 million after interest costs on its financing are included.

The new "Lolita" was hatched in 1990 when Mario Kassar, the former chairman of now-defunct Carolco Pictures, bought the rights to the novel from the Nabokov estate and immediately engaged Mr. Lyne

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as the director. They hired three separate screenwriters — James Dearden and the playwrights Harold Pinter and David Mamet — to fashion a script before settling on Stephen Schiff, a magazine writer at the New Yorker who had never written a produced screenplay. After Carolco went bankrupt, Mr. Kassar got Chargeurs to finance the movie.

Costs of "Lolita" escalated because of the unorthodox way it was filmed. For starters, a total of 38 separate locations around the country were used, including sites in Wilmington, N.C.; New Orleans; El Paso, Texas; and Northern California. Moreover, Mr. Lyne shot the script in sequence, instead of the more typical and efficient method of shooting the script around related scenes. The sequential method preserved the "integrity" of the novel, according to a person associated with "Lolita."

Neither Pathe nor the film's two producers, Mr. Kassar and Joel Michaels, would comment on the production. Mr. Lyne and his agent, Mr. Berg, also declined to comment. But people close to the movie say they expect to have a U.S. distributor shortly, and they note that the film already has earned back a portion of its production costs through the sale of foreign distribution rights.

The chances of a deal increases if Pathe lowers or entirely drops its demand for a \$25 million rights fee so a distributor could put up all or part of the marketing and distribution costs and split expenses and revenue in the U.S. with Pathe.

Studios that have turned down "Lolita" — Paramount, for example — could have a change of heart if more favorable terms can be struck. Paramount's chairman, Sherry Lansing, is a fan of Mr. Lyne's and was an executive producer of his racy "Basic Instinct." Though she declined to comment, people at the studio say she has told colleagues she thinks "Lolita" is well-made but the deal is "too rich."

Another possible studio is Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc., which needs movies to bolster its own lineup. MGM distributed Chargeurs' previous foray into Hollywood filmmaking — 1995's "Showgirls." That film cost about \$38 million to make and took in only \$8.7 million at the U.S. box office. "Showgirls," one of the most critically panned films in recent release, nonetheless became popular in home video.