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POLANSKI
By Heather Haddon

As celebrities coddle Polanski, backlash grows among women's group and other stars

Earth to Hollywood.

After a chorus of celebrities came out in support of jailed film director Roman Polanski, women's groups and other big names pushed back yesterday, saying no amount of tinseltown clout can excuse a sex crime.

"Rape is rape. This is one Hollywood star who does not celebrate or defend Roman Polanski," actress Kirstie Alley wrote on her Twitter feed yesterday.

During the weekend, the famed director was arrested on charges of unlawful sexual contact dating back to 1977, when he plied a 13-year-old girl with champagne and forced her to have sex. Polanski pleaded guilty to the crime, but fled to France and was never punished for attacking the young model. Authorities nabbed the director of "Chinatown" and "Rosemary's Baby" when he arrived at the Zurich Film Festival.

Within days, more than 100 stars — including Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen — had endorsed a "Free Roman Polanski" petition. On the "The View," Whoopi Goldberg said that the director had not committed "rape-rape."

"It's outrageous," said Sonia Ossorio, president of the National Organization of Women-New York City. "Under what circumstances is that excusable?"

New Yorkers, even those who admired Polanski's work, also recoiled from all the support. "It's way creepy," said Robert McMaster, 41, of Brooklyn. "I can't think of any reason to support a pedophile rapist."

Samantha Gailey, the victim, has called for authorities to leave Polanski alone, and stars like Peter Fonda and Debra Winger said it's time to drop the 30-year-old case.

Still, Hollywood works in its own dimension, where currying favor with a landmark director can outweigh the importance of appearing moral, marketing experts said.

"Hollywood is not Middle America," said John Tantillo, a psychologist and president of a Manhattan-based marketing company. "There is a way of life that is very unique to that industry."

For other celebrities, Polanski's misdeeds might bring back memories of the notoriously sordid 1970s, when celebrities lived even further over the edge, said Lori Levine, founder of the Flying Television talent agency in Manhattan.

But standing up for Polanski is dicey, according to media analysts. Goldberg ended up distancing herself from the "rape-rape" comment yesterday, saying she was just "trying to make sure we had our facts straight."

Backing a rapist also sets a dangerous precedent, with the public not always able to separate the nuances of different rape cases, said Peter Kanaris, coordinator for public education with the New York State Psychological Association.

"It's either right or wrong," Kanaris said.

Polanski is being held in a jail cell in Zurich, with his lawyers fighting his extradition to the United States.

Hollywood is divided over whether to support Roman Polanski.

Polanski supporters include: Penelope Cruz, Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, David Lynch, Whoopie Goldberg, Mike Nichols, Terry Gilliam, Monica Bellucci.

Anti-Polanski celebs include: Kirstie Alley, Luc Besson, Michael Seitzman, Sherri Shepherd

