

Teen tycoons

You may not have heard of them, but this year two seemingly ordinary teenagers will shift \$1bn in TV, videos, books and clothing. Polly Vernon meets the 'multi-media spanning, mass-market snaring, card-carrying phenomenon' that is Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen

Polly Vernon
The Observer, Saturday 27 September 2003

In downtown Toronto, in the midst of the edgy, indie mêlée of the 2003 film festival, a scene from a definitively un-art-house movie is being shot. In what is technically known as a 'vacant lot,' a Warner Bros approximation of a rock concert is in full swing. A crowd of pretty youths does a glossy grunge-lite look and bounce on command. No one moshes, no one spits and there will be no unauthorised crowd surfing. Eugene Levy, perennial hapless authority figure from endless teen flicks of the American Pie variety, manoeuvres his way through the throng on cue.

It takes about 15 seconds to realise that once it's finished, this film, New York Minute (shot in Toronto as it's cheaper) will not be breaking any creative boundaries, affirming anyone's life, causing controversy, forcing reverberations through the multiplex-literate world, or otherwise reinventing the international film scene. Not a hope. But that's not the point of it. The point of it is its stars/producers, the surprisingly un-ubiquitous yet phenomenally powerful 17-year-old twins, Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen. New York Minute is their first major film, their first high-profile outing with virtually grown-up-celebrity personas and the latest move in their bid to monopolise all aspects of popular culture.

You wouldn't necessarily think, to look at them, that the Olsens have world domination pencilled in as an end goal. They flit skittishly around the edge of the shot in I love New York T-shirts and mini kilts, the dernier cri in crowd-pleasing poppet. Mary-Kate and Ashley have long, streaky, breeze-ruffled hair and vast, limpid, blue eyes which seem entirely lacking in the flinty-edged, ambitious-glint department. They are fraternal twins, near-copies of each other, and built all fragile, like the wafy Mattel effigies mass produced in their image (dolls that have out-sold all others except Barbie in the US). They are the anti-Hiltons, whatever the precise opposite of the wild-eyed, fast-living, hellcat heiresses is, a Manga cartoonist's idea of perfection. At first glance, therefore, they wouldn't strike you as the billion-dollar spinning, multi-media spanning, mass-market snaring, card-carrying cultural phenomenon type; significant enough to inspire the Hollywood Reporter to name them the most powerful women in Hollywood in 2002; unusual enough that Vanity Fair would headline them in their teen special earlier this year; hip enough that Rolling Stone would embrace them as cover stars only last month. But that shows how much you know.

Gaining an audience with the Olsens is a lot like wangling quality time with Madonna or J-Lo or the Queen or God, and so you do a lot when it's offered to you. Fly to Canada last minute on a ticket that cost three-and-a-half grand, go to the place where they are filming, and sit, and watch, and wait, on the off-chance they'll give five spare minutes to talk to you, for example. And when, eventually, you get ushered into an anonymous room, with six other journalists from six other countries, against whom you must battle for the twins' attention, you feel, well, grateful.

They arrive. Perma smiles and perfectly unspoilt - no bit of them is pierced, not even their ears. Ashley says 'Hello, all,' in good-girl California perky-speak, doing a little, open-fingered wave as she does, and Mary-Kate says, 'Thank you all so much for coming. Did you come a long way?' Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen - or more properly brand identity mary-kateandashley - are such a groundbreaking proposition, it's hard to get your head round them. There's no precedent. So they're elusive. They're not exactly actors, despite the movie, despite the fact that they have acted a lot, making their on-screen debut when they were nine months old, sharing a role on long-running soap Full House, and growing up on screen in front of their US target demographic.

They are not producers, although they are co-producing New York Minute, the youngest people ever to produce a film of its size. They aren't singers, although they have released a load of albums. They're not internet celebs, but they have the most popular teen destination website in the world, mary-kateandashley.com; or publishers, though they have a series of books detailing their fictional adventures worth \$150m; or fashion designers, although their tweeny-hip, sparkly, crop-top'n/flare jean-focussed collection, mary-kateandashley, sells at a phenomenal rate through Wal-Mart in the US, and Asda in the UK. As does their health and beauty range, and their accessories range. Their toothpaste. Their Playstation games. Their bed linen.

Mary-Kate and Ashley are, in fact, the sum of all these things. The second biggest child, tween and teen brand in the world after Disney, a beyond-flourishing concern which this year will shift a projected \$1bn worth of merchandise. Mary-Kate and Ashley, the girls, are mega moguls - mary-kateandashley is a brand-extension exercise turned empire. They won't tell you that, of course. Humility is as essential to the brand identity as pretty hair and glowing skin and sparkly denim.

'I don't have child stars here. I have lovely, humble young women,' says Dennie Gordon, director of New York Minute. Ask them who and what they think they are, and Ashley, the more considered and angsty of the two, will pause, and then say: 'I think we do a lot of things, but I think, just as much as we work and have all these other jobs, we're still kids. We still have a regular life.' So your job is to be kids? 'Yes. I guess.'

Robert Thorne, co-founder and chief executive of Dualstar Entertainment Group, the girls' production company, has a rather less fanciful perspective on the Olsen's place in the universe. 'Mary-kateandashley,' he says, in one, long, dry, Texan-accented monologue, 'is a retail and entertainment brand that has continued to succeed for nearly 17 years - under my watch for nearly 14 - that continues to grow, continues to defy all odds, all territorial boundaries, age boundaries and now gender boundaries. And it's exciting and empowering and aspirational, and as it's dynamic it probably doesn't have an end in sight, unless the girls want it to.'

He should know. Robert Thorne is the architect of the mary-kateandashley phenomenon. The Olsens are not exactly helpless pawns in the equation. Their influence is absolute, their opinions and decisions are complied with, nothing, nothing, happens without their say so. Thorne says he's been meeting the girls alone, without their parents 'since they were about 12, 13' and that it was from that point on that their input became solid and real. But it's Thorne, first hired by the Olsens' father as an entertainment lawyer to renegotiate their Full House contract when the girls were four, who has truly masterminded their evolution to super-brand status.

He didn't start with a grand plan, he says. That didn't kick in till 1999, when Thorne ensured that the girls stopped being known as the Olsen twins or the Full House twins and became Mary-Kate and Ashley, 'very aggressively we achieved that, very hands on', and simultaneously began work on the fashion line. 'When we launched the fashion line in January 2001, in the biggest store in America, and it succeeded, that's when we realised we'd achieved brand status. Yeah, I came up with a grand plan. And now the plan is working. We're globalising the brand, turning it into a major global brand and we're at the same time growing their celebrity from a Hollywood point of view. And retaining a lot of free time for them, too, and a lot of normalcy.'

'No,' Thorne says. 'Well, I saw potential, but not for anything of this magnitude.'

Is there something very unique about the twins?

'No.'

Or you?

'No.'

But then, why've you been so successful?

'I don't know. I read a quote last night: "When I work really hard, I get lucky." The point of that is, it's not been luck, it's been hard work. Hard work and taking charge of everything. Not waiting till the next guy comes back to you with an idea. Being able to figure it out and tell the next guy. Always staying ahead of everybody. That's what a leader does. Leads. We have a saying, it's on all our letterheads: "Nothing just happens, we make it happen."' Is there anything Mary-Kate and Ashley can't do?

'Errrr... No. I don't think so.'

Does it scare you, that they're so young and have so much power and focus, and seem so unstoppable?

'Yeah. Both me and them, I think. We're all doing more than we thought.'

In the back room of the Toronto film set, the twins are describing their New York Minute on-screen dynamic ('Ummm, so we're sisters, but Jane's like the mom, like the over-achiever, and Roxy's like the child, she just wants to get her demo to the band, and their mom died when they were young, so that's how it's played out, and so it's not like they don't get on, but they are just so far apart from each other') explaining how they juggle work and school, and describing the time in between. 'Mostly,' says Ashley, 'weekends, we stay home and knit.'

'And watch TV,' says Mary-Kate.

'And watch TV,' confirms Ashley.

'And we're trying to get into college.

We want to get to college,' says Mary-Kate. 'We will get to college. That's our plan. We'll be room mates.'

'Oh yeah,' says Ashley. 'Definitely.'

In the flesh, once you get over the impact of the saccharine loveliness, there truly doesn't seem to be anything particularly unique about the Olsens, as Thorne insisted. They are unassuming and sweet and maybe even a touch young and a touch bland, for 17-year-olds who are mind-blowingly rich and in a position quite unselfconsciously to say things like, 'Well, the script took a year. We got through, like eight writers.' And 'Yes. We hired the director.' This understated 'normalcy' is in part calculated, central to their accessible everygirl authenticity, the thing that keeps them fabulously tween-relevant. You can't speak to a Dualstar or Warner Bros rep for longer than a minute without them reminding you that the girls 'still have their chores to do at home'. But, equally, it's just them. They are a bit ordinary. No one ever suggests that they are fabulously talented in any way. Accomplished, polished and professional, yes. But not unstoppably gifted. Something else is making them so irresistible.

In the early days, it was surely all about their twinness. There's something about the Olsens being duplicated, their prettiness, their winsomeness, their girliness, which compounds and multiplies its impact. It's the ultimate tween fantasy. A demographic that prizes fearsome friendship - sorority in the most literal sense - above and beyond boys is bound to be wholly enamoured of the twin notion. And compelled to buy into it.

But now, their incredible good fortune, the thing that's going to ensure their longevity, their transition from child to teen to adult stars, is that Mary-Kate and Ashley have grown up sexy, without entirely losing their tween-luring innocent edge. They are ostensibly unaware of their sexiness. 'I really can't think of myself like that,' says Mary-Kate. 'Like people say, oh, so-and-so thinks you're cute... Nah.' Which of course makes them sexier still to those who are aware. There are websites dedicated to counting down to their 18th birthday. 'Find out if the twins are already legal in your state! Avoid pesky jail time and legal fees!' invites one. Twenty-one-year-old Mend, like their New York Minute co-star Jared Padelecki, are inclined to say things like, 'Yes, those girls are definitely hot. I'm going to have it in my contract from here on: "Must Work With Hot-Looking Twins".' And Jack Osborne, who has a cameo role in the flick, has expressed an interest in Mary-Kate. There is, in short, no shame in attaching yourself to their brand, even if you're a bloke.

The central purpose of New York Minute is to exploit this lust. To debut the girls as adults and snare boys with their nascent sex appeal. New York Minute is phase three or four of Robert Thorne's grand plan incarnate. In Mary-Kate and Ashley speak: 'With this movie, we definitely want to make sure the boys could come in and relate to and enjoy it.' And in Robert Thorne speak: 'We wanted to grow them up on screen.'

Director Dennie Gordon is complicit in the whole deal. 'When I took the movie, I told the studio: don't be scared, we're going there. We're going to push the edge on the PG13 envelope. To grow these girls up in front of an audience, we need to get some boys in, we need some action, we need some cleavage, and we're going to have it. So we have their first nude scene... no, I'm kidding on that. But I keep thinking, wow. At the risk of mentioning any names, Cameron Diaz watch out. When you have someone who is gorgeous, smart, funny and twins, it is loaded.'

How Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen grow up personally is another issue. You'd imagine that the potential for them to go off the rails, in the noble tradition of Drew Barrymore, Macaulay Culkin and Charlotte Church, is considerable. Unsurprisingly, they say they don't think that will happen. Thorne translates:

'I guess there's always a danger that they'll do regular things,' he says. 'They are human. But I think their heads are screwed on tight and they realise the cost would be dear. I don't think they'll ever go as far as certain celebrities have done, but I think the world will see them make mistakes and be human. That's natural, and I hope that the world will understand that.' Plus, presumably, there's always the chance that a bit of timely well-orchestrated late-teen wildness will take the brand to the next phase.

In the meantime, the twins will go to an as-yet-unspecified university, after launching themselves into another three major territories - Japan, Germany and France.

And after that? 'I think we want to carry on in everything,' says Mary-Kate. 'As much as we can. Whatever we think we'd like. That's why we're so lucky, because we've established what we like younger, so we always have the chance to do more when we're older. Hopefully. Knock on wood.' And they knock each other gently on the forehead, in a long-practised ritual gesture of super-twin togetherness, and the assembled company smiles fondly on.

• New York Minute will be released next summer.

Share

Tweet

Share0

Email

Article history

Observer

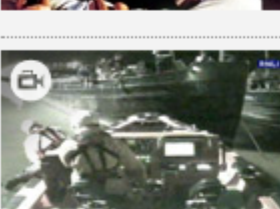
Life and style

Today's best video



From Apple I to the Apple Watch

We look back at Apple's tech products, including game-changers such as the iMac and iPhone, curiosities like Lisa – and duds, like the 20th Anniversary Macintosh



Richard Kiel: Jaws' best bites

Celebration of late actor who played metal-mouthed James Bond villain



Man rescued from Thames after freezing to anchor

Man pulled from chilly waters of river early on Tuesday



Oscar Pistorius murder trial: the key moments

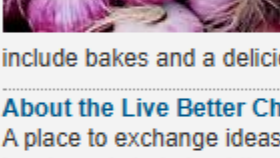
We look back at some of the key moments of the Pistorius trial

Live Better



The Pig Society? Life in South Pork

Taking turns to feed and water, a small group (our fifth community project) are collectively raising nine pigs to make sausages, and saving money at the same time. [Read more](#)



19 recipe ideas for leftover onions

Unused onions sprouting or going off? Don't cry - our Dinner Doctor's many solutions include bakes and a delicious gravy. [Read more](#)

About the Live Better Challenge

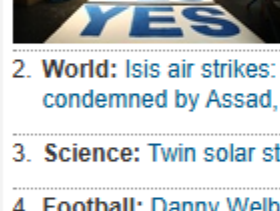
A place to exchange ideas, try new things, have a laugh, and chat about the way we live our lives. [Learn more](#)

On the Guardian

Most viewed

Latest

Last 24 hours



1. Politics: Scottish independence poll shows support cooling as referendum draws near

2. World: Isis air strikes: Obama's plan condemned by Assad, Moscow and Tehran

3. Science: Twin solar storms arrive at Earth

4. Football: Danny Welbeck not up to standards required, says Louis van Gaal

5. Comment: The Great Naked Celebrity Photo Leak of 2014 is just the beginning | Roxane Gay

More most viewed

the guardian

soulmates

The Guardian's online dating site



smileygib, 36



MrMonkey, 35

Meet someone worth meeting

I am a

Man

Seeking

Women

Aged

25

to

45

In

United Kingdom

Within

20 miles

Of

Search

License/buy our content | Privacy policy | Terms of service | US advertising | A - Z index | About us

© 2014 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.