

The same people who made them feel like geeks in high school would give their eyeteeth to get next to Mira Sorvino and Lisa Kudrow now that they've got Hollywood (and some really cute guys) eating out of the palms of their hands

BY HILLARY JOHNSON

They're the Cool

ANDREW ECCLES/YOUTUBE



est Girls in Town

MIRA SORVINO APOLOGIZES PROFUSELY for being late as she unlocks the door to the house she's renting in the Hollywood Hills while she films the action movie *The Replacement Killers*. Inside, walls of glass and yards of polished hardwood frame a view of canyon trees and the swimming pool, and she leads the way to the quiet, minimalist living room with white slipcovered sofas and a sisal mat carpet. On a corner of the coffee table is a vintage copy of Jorge Luis Borges's poetry, in Spanish (under it is a notepad, indicating she's not only been reading it but taking notes).

Sorvino is so unlike Linda Ash,

the buxom hooker with the cartoon voice in *Mighty Aphrodite*, it's disconcerting. Her real voice is extremely even; and though very attractive, without the peroxide and push-up bra, well,

Lisa's Life (AT A GLANCE)

- **GREW UP IN:** Tarzana, California. (Her parents still live in the same house Kudrow moved to when she was 2).
- **ALMA MATER:** Vassar College (degree in sociobiology)
- **HOME BASE:** Los Angeles (with husband Michel Stern, an ad exec)
- **HOW SHE CUT HER TEETH IN ACTING:** As a comedienne with the *Groundlings*, an L.A. improv group, which led to guest spots on shows like *Cheers* and *Newhart*.
- **HER BIG BREAK:** Entered the popular consciousness as the hilariously brain-dead waitress Ursula on *Mad About You*, and rose to stardom as her equally witless twin, Phoebe, on *Friends*.
- **THE BENEFIT OF A STEADY GIG:** "Being on *Friends* is a huge advantage: I look forward to doing things I really want to do, and having a paycheck, I can [also] say no."
- **HOW SHE VIEWS AUDITIONS:** "Improv helped me a lot with them—it's all about letting go, being there in the moment and rolling with it. If you're doing it [improv] right, then everything that happens is okay—even if they make you wait two hours, it's okay."
- **A PROMISING FILM CAREER:** Had a small role in Albert Brooks's *Mother*. Originated the role of Michele in screenwriter Robin Schiff's stage play, *Ladies' Room*—in her hands, a minor character turned out to be the hit of the show, and became the basis for *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*.
- **HER TAKE ON WHAT BEST FRIENDS TALK ABOUT:** "Anything. It's more intimate and graphic than guys get."
- **...AND ON WHEN IT HELPS TO PLAY DUMB WITH GUYS:** "If someone is making a pass, I'll pretend like they didn't so no one gets embarrassed. Then I'll think, 'Well I didn't have to deal with it.' So I'm happy."

grew up in Tenafly, New Jersey (her father is noted character actor Paul, from *GoodFellas* and TV's *Law & Order*; her mother, Lorraine Davis, a

homemaker), and Kudrow was raised in Tarzana, California, where her father, Lee, is a well-known physician specializing in headache research and her mother, Nedra, a travel agent.

But here's the twist: Both women have serious academic credentials. Sorvino, an honors graduate of Harvard University, earned a degree in East Asian Studies, lived in Beijing (she speaks Chinese!), and briefly considered an academic career, which would have assuaged her father's anxiety about her following in his footsteps ("I think he just didn't want rejection as the mainstay of his children's diet"). After graduation, Sorvino directed a documentary on Russia and worked as a production assistant and script reader for Robert De Niro, but ultimately decided to focus on acting—a providential choice, given that last year she netted an Oscar for *Mighty Aphrodite* (which certainly made her dad a bit less anxious).

Kudrow's route to stardom was just as circuitous: Inspired by her father, at 15 she decided to become a doctor and went on to study sociobiology at Vassar. She was seriously considering becoming a medical researcher when her brother's friend from school, *Saturday Night Live*'s Jon Lovitz, convinced her to try out for the *Groundlings*, a Los Angeles improvisational theater group (petri dish also for Phil Hartman and Paul Reubens), where Conan O'Brien, of all people, helped her with her acting technique. She started landing guest spots on sitcoms, and eventually became known for her ditsiness on *Mad About You* and, later, *Friends*.

Hanging out with these two can make for quite the evening as they fall into free-associative riffs on everything from babies to Shakespeare, so imagine their chemistry on-screen—which they just tested to great success in the *Romy and Michele* comedy. In the movie, they play—what else?—two geeky blond fashion victims who decide to put on a big show of worldly success to avenge themselves on their former classmates.

Which brings us to the last unexpected similarity: The story line hits closer to home for these two friends than you'd ever guess.

Revenge of the Nerds

Geeks in high school. Actually, to hear them trade memories, it's not a stretch to see why Sorvino and Kudrow might have been teased for excessive braininess:

"I was born 35," Kudrow says. "In high school, I was the one after the football game, when everyone said, 'Come on, Mitch is driving,' I'd say, 'Mitch! He's 16 and he's had a beer! Why would you get into a car with him?'"

"My parents would read to us from *Scientific American* the latest study about how marijuana would affect female gametes," Sorvino recalls.

"At least zoologically you can't argue with it," Kudrow pipes up earnestly. "It's true."

Kudrow went to a public high school with some 800 students per grade. Sorvino went to a much

smaller, private one, with maybe a tenth of that population in her grade. Of the two, she had the worse time of it. "We were together from seventh through twelfth, some of us longer," she recalls. "Images got formed early, and they stuck. There was definitely an in-crowd, and there wasn't enough room for other crowds—I was in the same honors classes with the same twelve students year after year. I wasn't the most socially adept of people. I had several really good friends, but none of them were really that friendly with each other. They all mutually respected each other, but we didn't have our little gang, which would have been great, because once you have your own little gang you don't need to worry about what other gangs think of you.

"It bothered me at the time, as a kid, just because there were certain people who made other people's lives miserable. Maybe I deserved some of the misery I experienced, but I don't think that's true. I look back and say I must have been responsible for some of my predicament by my own personality, like I did things that didn't blend in well, but at the same time, it's not my job to blend. I hope it isn't."

She pauses a second, thoughtful, then laughs:

"I basically used *Romy and Michele* as a psychotherapy experiment to get over my demons."

That's only partly true. In fact, college gave her self-esteem a huge boost and she blossomed in the challenging new environment; she never looked back, not even for her reunion.

"I was working, so I was sort of pleased to not have to go to it. I was kind of dreading it," she says, a little ruefully.

"Because...?" prompts Kudrow.

"Because I was still afraid of all the mean people," she admits. "And doing the movie was my way of dealing with that fear and getting over it. I'm not kidding!"

To hear Kudrow tell it, Sorvino didn't miss much—her five-year reunion was, in a word, depressing. Barely out of college, no one had accomplished anything yet and everyone still looked, was, the same. And by the time Kudrow's tenth reunion came around, she had other reasons to not want to attend: "I heard talk of what people were doing, and they weren't very happy: 'This one's married but already divorced—and not yet 30.' Most people, it seems, didn't know what their dream was, so they didn't even know what to pursue. I just didn't want to go. I was too happy, and I didn't want to rub it in anyone's face."

Men, Babies, and Ironing

It probably isn't possible to be hipper or more popular than Kudrow and Sorvino are at this exact moment. Kudrow is two years into a happy marriage to advertising executive Michel Stern, while Sorvino is dating the undisputed king of nerdy supercool, Quentin Tarantino. And neither has even read *The Rules*.

"But there is one thing about the whole *Rules*

philosophy, as I understand it," Sorvino says cautiously. "I think it all boils down to the fact that you have to play hard to get." She pauses, purposefully raising her eyebrow, as if she knows it's surprising to hear someone so young espouse such a retro philosophy. "You have to treat yourself with self-respect and establish a little bit of distance, so the guy has to step up to the plate and act right. You're not waiting there saying, 'Just ignore me a little bit more and I'll be your girlfriend.'"

"If things are not going the way they should in a relationship, step back a little," she continues with delicate force. "And then you see if you still want it—and if they still want it they realize it, because it goes away." Clearly this is something Sorvino feels strongly about—in fact, it sounds like all-too-recent experience talking, but she throws that potato to Kudrow with a wry shrug: "You're married—those things are probably long ago."

"No, you still need to do it all. You have to keep reinventing your relationship and reminding yourself how to be honest and confront with a willing heart. They don't say it's a lot of work for nothing," she chuckles. "Especially with dating, the key is, it's okay to let someone know you love them and want them, but make sure they also know you don't need them. And there's a *big* difference."

"A *huge* difference," Sorvino agrees.

"That's what I finally learned with the last man I dated...who I ended up marrying," Kudrow says. "I finally got it. And *he* finally got it—that the only way to be really happy in life or in any relationship is to be happy with yourself (*continued on page 155*)

Mira's Life (AT A GLANCE)

- GREW UP IN: Tenafly, New Jersey.
- ALMA MATER: Harvard University (degree in East Asian Studies)
- DOG'S NAME: Deer
- IS DATING: Film director Quentin Tarantino
- MEMORABLE SUPPORTING ROLES: In Robert Redford's *Quiz Show*, Whit Stillman's *Barcelona*, and her 1993 debut performance in *Amongst Friends*, among others.
- HER MANY AWARDS: In 1996, Mira Sorvino won an Academy Award as Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of a hooker in Woody Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite*, a performance that also netted her the New York Film Critics Circle, National Board of Review, and Golden Globe awards.
- WHAT'S UP NEXT: Sorvino will next be seen in Guillermo del Toro's sci-fi thriller, *Mimic*, followed by her action debut opposite Hong Kong action hero Chow Yun-Fat in *The Replacement Killers*.
- HER LITTLE ACTING PROBLEM: "There's a way of running, of using your arms and legs, that looks girly. I took seven years of ballet, and so it's like, 'Oh, Mira, don't pirouette through the scene.'"
- HOW FAR SHE GOES FOR FRIENDS: "Close friendships with women are really important—[especially] that loyalty to each other. I remember as a teenager, calling someone who hurt a friend of mine and threatening them to stay away from her. I was so mad!"
- HER PHILOSOPHY ON LOVE: "Everybody says, 'Once you're past a certain age, that's it,' but I know much older people than myself who've been single for a while, and then they find love. I don't think there's a cutoff point at which a woman stops meeting a man who could love her or whom she could love."
- ... AND ON HOW TO KNOW WHEN TO CALL IT QUITS: "I have to like myself enough to say, 'No matter how much I love this other person, I can't give myself less than what I deserve in life, which is treatment equal to the treatment I'd give them.' At that point, it's time to say, 'Enough.'"

Cooler Girls

(continued from page 103)

and start from there. It's a cliché, but clichés are overused for a reason.

"Michel was kind of a scary guy. He'd go out with someone for two months, and to end it—well, if he actually *told* them it was over, they were lucky. He was like, Scary Guy. I remember being so honest, frighteningly honest about how much I didn't need him."

"You could be okay alone," Sorvino says. "It wouldn't be a reason to lie down and have a Juliet-like death. There's a reason *Romeo and Juliet* happens to the very, very young."

"It wasn't true love, they were too young to know better," Kudrow pronounces solemnly.

"We're reinterpreting Shakespeare," Sorvino announces, matching her earnest tone. "You don't think Juliet could have found someone else to love in ten years?"

"She'd only be 24!" Kudrow cries, and they both crack up before returning to the subject at hand. Which now is going in the direction of people's basic nature.

"People are basically good, and they're basically flawed as well," says Sorvino. "That's the thing. It's kind of like, there's this weird idea of a perfect Prince Charming, but that's just as damning as saying that men are all pigs, because there's no perfect human being on this earth. Everybody is going to have to have some annoying quality that you didn't notice when the stardust was in your eyes at first. Including yourself."

Sorvino parodies a conversation between herself and Tarantino: "It's like, '*Mira, I thought you could iron!*' 'No, I singe. I make clothes shiny.'"

"I discovered the best way to iron is to turn the shower on very hot and hang the suit in the bathroom for ten minutes," Sorvino says.

"Yes!" says Kudrow, continuing with mock gravity.

It's hard to picture either of them standing at an ironing board in fuzzy slippers and curlers, rug rats underfoot. But for Kudrow, at least, being the married one, the question of kids and family is not all that abstract. In fact, you get the distinct impression that she's thought this all out carefully, thank you very much.

Other than ironing, nothing fazes these women—not the casting couch, which they claim never to have encountered, nor rejection; it's all part of business.

'*Yeah, but we're going to be late and I thought you could—*' 'I never said I could iron. I CAN'T IRON!'"

Kudrow practically screams. "I tried ironing myself—oh, I made such an effort for Michel. I can't believe my mother did that all the time—it's really hard to do, it's a *skill*."

"A lot of actors who are interested in a family do sitcoms because you get regular hours and then hopefully the longer you go [on the show], the shorter the hours get, because you know what you're doing," she explains. "Michel and I would like to have kids. We don't (continued on page 156)

New Mentadent[®] Advanced Whitening Toothpaste.

A complete whitening toothpaste. Not only does it have an advanced whitening formula that safely whitens your teeth and controls tartar, it also has fluoride, baking soda and peroxide—the ingredients dentists recommend most for the care of teeth and gums. Your smile can be more than white, it can be healthy too.



