

Stars of Stage, Screen ... and Freshman Biology



From left: Chip East, Reuters; Chris Haston/NBC Universal; Matthew Simmons/Getty Images; Peter Kramer/Getty Images; Michael Buckner/Getty Images;

Julia Stiles, left, chose Columbia; Leelee Sobieski, Brown; Amanda Peet, Columbia; Claire Danes, Yale; Maggie Gyllenhaal, Columbia.

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By [THOMAS VINCIGUERRA](#)

WHEN students returned for the fall semester at Brown in Providence, R.I., last week, many came fresh from vacations spent working as government interns, editorial assistants or in other entry-level positions.

But Leelee Sobieski, movie star and Brown undergraduate, had a different experience. She spent the summer in Vancouver, British Columbia, shooting the fantasy movie "Dungeon Siege" with Burt Reynolds, Ray Liotta and John Rhys-Davies.

"It's a big, crazy thing," she said in a telephone interview from Canada. "I'm dressed in beautiful princess clothes and locked away in a castle."

Ms. Sobieski, whose film credits include "Eyes Wide Shut" and "Never Been Kissed," is just one of a wave of young actresses pursuing not just work and fame but a top liberal arts education, too. And often they find that trying to have it all is a challenge. Ms. Sobieski, with the filming still not complete, is taking this semester off.

The roster of matriculating actresses has star quality. In the spring Julia Stiles graduated from Columbia. Natalie Portman received her degree from Harvard in 2003. Earlier, Claire Danes attended Yale. The list goes on: Reese Witherspoon, Stanford; Maggie Gyllenhaal, Columbia; Elizabeth Banks, University of Pennsylvania; Anna Paquin, Columbia. And then there are the Olsen twins, Mary-Kate and Ashley (New York University, '08).

Actresses with bachelor's degrees are nothing new, going back to Katharine Hepburn (Bryn Mawr, '28). Her heirs include Ali MacGraw (Wellesley, '60), Meryl Streep (Vassar, '71) and Sigourney Weaver (Stanford, '72).

But these women became widely known only after graduating. Today many actresses make their professional bones as children or teenagers, then trade scripts for textbooks in a way that young stars like Shirley Temple or Tatum O'Neal never did.

Even if these women make their biggest marks after graduating, a degree from a top university can be important in establishing their identity. "It's a marvelous way to burnish your credentials," said Peter Sealey, a former president at Columbia Pictures and an adjunct professor at the University of California, Berkeley. "It gives you a whole new gravitas. Hollywood seeks that kind of validation by elite institutions not related to show business."

"What I can't understand," Mr. Sealey added, "is why it applies mainly to women."

There are exceptions, of course - like Jonathan Taylor Thomas (Harvard '04), Ms. Gyllenhaal's brother, Jake (Columbia, '02) and Fred Savage (Stanford, '99) - but educators and people in the entertainment industry

agree that college does not hold the same appeal for young male actors that it does for their female counterparts, a disparity that mirrors the wider college landscape, where women generally outnumber men. But the actresses may also be choosing college because they, more easily than men, can imagine not acting one day.

"The career life expectancy of an actress is pretty short," said Janice Min, the editor of *Us Weekly*. "It's still true that actresses over the age of 40 have an incredibly hard time getting good roles. If they go to college, the skills they learn there can enhance their ability to write or produce or direct. It's almost like an investment, one of the better ones they can make."

One thing is certain: few rising actresses are making that investment at less illustrious colleges, people in the industry say. "I can't think of any actor we've heard of going to SUNY Purchase," said Leslee Dart, chief executive of the Dart Group, the New York-based talent agency.

The first wave of college-bound stars began in the early 1980's, when Jodie Foster and Brooke Shields made headlines by going to Yale and Princeton, respectively. For Ms. Foster, who had starred with Robert De Niro in "Taxi Driver," the decision was simple. "I didn't think I was going to be an actor growing up," she said in a phone interview. "As long as I could remember, the conventional wisdom was that when you turn 16 or 17, you'll never work as a child actor again." She added, "My priority was trying to find something else to do."

Others followed suit: Laura Linney, Brown, class of '86; Mira Sorvino, Harvard, '89; Jennifer Connelly, Yale, '94; Amanda Peet, Columbia, '94. And people in Hollywood say the trend is still growing.

"Two words: role model," said the entertainment lawyer Peter Dekom, the author with Mr. Sealey of "Hollywood vs. the Future." "Exploding the 'dumb actress syndrome' in this extraordinarily powerful and dynamic way is wonderful for the business. The more role models, the more women will be inspired to follow you."

Colleges themselves can also benefit. Even before they become wealthy,

and presumably generous, alumnae, these student stars add a bit of buzz to a campus. "Everyone wants their school to be 'hot' as far as young people are concerned," said William Oliver, a Columbia alumnus and admissions administrator for more than 25 years. "And this is what does it."

But administrators at elite schools are quick to say that they do not admit actresses simply because of their star power, that a university like Harvard or Stanford hardly needs a movie star to give it luster. "These are genuinely intellectually sound young people," said Lee Stetson, dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania.

Even if actresses have the advantage of fame, educators say, they are not altogether different from others who might add to a student body's diversity. "These colleges are looking for interesting people," said George Keller, a higher education consultant in Baltimore. "The best oboist in the state is always going to win an extra 50 points, as will a 250-pound tackle."

And sometimes the actresses' peers are not easily overshadowed. "Some of the kids had such major accomplishments themselves," said Sara Gilbert (Yale '97), who filmed half of her episodes of the sitcom "Roseanne" while in college. "They had played Carnegie Hall and things like that."

In that kind of environment, fame sometimes cuts little ice. When Ms. Stiles appeared on "Late Night With Conan O'Brien" as a freshman, she made what she thought was a humorous remark about Columbia cafeteria workers. Many students interpreted her crack as evidence of smug Tinseltown superiority. A writer in a campus newspaper called her a "sloe-eyed Hollywood wench."

But such stings are minor compared with the tension that actresses face between work and school. Many feel they cannot afford to stop working completely. "The pressure is on females to become celebrities at younger and younger ages," said Ms. Min of *Us Weekly*. "By the time you're in your mid-20's it's already too late."

As a result many actresses veer from the normal four-year college track. Ms. Stiles took five years to finish her bachelor's; so did Ms. Foster. An

extreme example is Elisabeth Shue. Not until after she had starred in "Cocktail" and "Adventures in Babysitting" and earned an Oscar nomination for "Leaving Las Vegas" did she get her Harvard degree. That was in 2000, 15 years after her expected graduation date.

But others have juggled work and classes well. Cara Buono made her professional debut at 12 in Harvey Fierstein's play "Spookhouse." Today she has films like "Two Ninas" and "Hulk" and the series "Third Watch" under her belt. In between she carried loads of 22 credits a semester at Columbia, graduating in 1993 with majors in English and political science after only three years and a summer session. "Every semester I was working," she said. "I spent my freshman year at Lincoln Center."

In many cases, however, career trumps classes. Ms. Witherspoon has put in only a year at Stanford; Ms. Connelly transferred from Yale to Stanford but has yet to graduate. Neither has Anna Paquin, originally a member of Columbia's class of '04, nor Ms. Danes, at Yale. Ashley Olsen is at New York University for her sophomore year, but her twin sister Mary-Kate has not joined her.

Sometimes college days can end before they begin. Both Katie Holmes and Christina Ricci were admitted to Columbia but did not attend. "I really, really was excited by the idea," Ms. Ricci said. "But I didn't come from a lot of money and I had been supporting myself and didn't have a lot set aside. So I felt my first obligation was to work. Also, I wanted to be hugely successful - strike while the iron's hot."

That kind of decision often governs whether an actress will complete her degree. Ms. Sobieski would normally have graduated from Brown this spring. She still has two years to go. "There's a part of me that says 'Uh-oh, better go back.' And there's another part of me that's been working since I was 11 and wants to get back to that."

But why bother embroidering a film career with a purely optional layer of liberal arts? Sometimes it's a matter of wanting knowledge for its own sake. "In a protective environment, you can read great books and learn from lectures, which you can't do while you're working," said Ms. Stiles, who graduated from Columbia after appearing in "10 Things I Hate About

You" and "Mona Lisa Smile."

But then there's the perspective of John Lithgow, Harvard, '65. He talked about the value of his diploma in a speech at his alma mater's commencement this spring. "Somehow," he said, "it never seemed to come in all that handy when I was auditioning for a soap opera or a potato chip commercial."