

## Who Will Buy 'Josie's' Big Joke?

Movies: The live-action version of 'Pussycats' is a sendup of consumer culture-- wrapped in mega-consumerism.

By RACHEL ABRAMOWITZ, Times Staff Writer

In the new candy-colored big screen version of the comic book/TV cartoon "Josie and the Pussycats," **the Pussycats-- played by nubile starlets Rachael Leigh Cook (as Josie), Tara Reid and Rosario Dawson--fly on a Target plane**, stay in a Revlon-endorsed hotel room, and visit a whale tank where the water's been sponsored by Evian.

Indeed, the movie churns like a turbocharged Cuisinart blend of every corporate insignia in America, featuring cameos by Starbucks, Diesel Jeans, Gatorade, Pizza Hut, Steve Madden Shoes, Coke and a McDonald's sign so large it hovers over New York City like King Kong.

It's a sendup of consumer culture--and one that in test screenings has sailed over the heads of most of the film's target audience of teenage girls.

"The fact that there's people who don't really recognize it's a joke, that's how bad everything else is," says writer-director Harry Elfont. The lanky, dark-haired 33-year-old and his fresh-faced, co-writer-director, Deborah Kaplan, 30, are taking a break from a last mad-dash editing spree to dine on salads in the Universal Studios commissary. The pair tend to speak in a fugue-like seamlessness, evincing an engaging blend of pop-culture enthusiasm, marketing savvy and unsuspecting friendliness.

"Josie and the Pussycats," loosely based on the 1970s cartoon, tells the story of a group of aspiring girl musicians who are discovered by evil record company executives and made into overnight stars, only to discover that the company is using their music to send subliminal advertising messages into the pliable minds of millions of unsuspecting teenagers. The Universal Pictures film opens Wednesday.

"There's an audience of, like, 8- to 14-year-old girls who just relate to this on a pure fun and pure wish-fulfillment level, where they're girls, and they're friends, and they're in the band, and they go conquer the world," Kaplan says, astutely dissecting the audience for the film, a viewpoint informed by the market research.

"And then there's a level from 23 to 40 that sees the satire, and then there's a small little section in there, that's still taking the movie a little too much at face value and is very idealistic. And they wrote on their test cards, 'I'm so offended, that you would try to sell stuff through this movie and who do you think we are!' And, that's what we're making fun of. Why would we have an Evian sign inside the whale tank? Maybe we were too subtle with it?"

Indeed, one particularly irate viewer wrote into the Ain't It Cool Web site with a second-by-second breakdown of the product-placement in the trailer, and fumed, "What kills the flick is crass commercialism," adding, "the movie is a mind-numbing montage of fast commercial images."

Of course, "Josie and the Pussycats" is coming from the studio that turned the anti-commercialism fable "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" into a merchandising bonanza, so maybe these critics aren't as dense as you might think. Even Elfont and Kaplan are gamely aware that they're trying to have their cake and eat it too.

"I don't feel like we're cynical in the movie, that we're saying all this stuff is evil," says Elfont. "I think all we're saying is be aware that this stuff is happening and make a choice. But the joke does continue outside of the movie theater."

"It's like, where does the movie start and where does product placement begin and end?" adds Kaplan, noting that they deleted a scene in which the heroines sign dolls cast in their image--dolls the studio is actually selling in stores. Indeed, a brigade of Josie products is wending its way into malls across America, and includes plush "Pussycats"-hairbands, nail files, makeup, T-shirts, guitars and wrist cuffs. Moreover, clips of Josie's stars are appearing in some of the advertising campaigns of the film's major corporate backers, such as John Frieda hair products.

The filmmakers say that one of the messages of the film is not so much "don't buy," but rather "don't buy mindlessly."

"The message of the movie is, be an individual," says Kaplan. "If some little girl is wearing a T-shirt that says 'Josie and the Pussycats,' I'd rather that they got the message of the movie, which is, 'I'm going to do whatever I want to do.' Not, 'Oh, I want McDonald's now because I saw it in a movie,'" says Kaplan.

None of the corporations whose products appear in "Josie" were paid for their services, but many donated a plethora of free products that helped the filmmaker compensate for deficiencies in its \$25-million budget production budget. For instance, Puma provided thousands of T-shirts to clothe the extras in a rock concert scene.

"For the most part, it was very easy to get advertisers," says producer Marc Platt. "They appreciated both the film's

ultimate message and its tongue-in-cheek quality, and, let's face it, they loved to have their products displayed."

Still, Universal, was sufficiently cautious about the film's jokes to require any corporation whose products appear in the film to explicitly read the script and sign releases. And some notable teen-friendly brands--such as the Gap and Nike--refused to play ball.

Other advertisers ended up in the film because of relationships with the corporate conglomerate behind "Josie." For instance, Universal has a deal to sell Coke in all the theme parks, which is how "Josie and the Pussycats" ended up as a Coke, and not a Pepsi, movie.

Given that they had to prepare a film six months ahead of time that would nonetheless appear cutting-edge when it premiered in the spring, Elfont and Kaplan consulted "cool-hunter" DeeDee Gordon of Look-Look.com, one of the leading analysts of teen likes and dislikes.

They talked mostly about casting, and Gordon recommended that they hire Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth to play the the evil record company owner, Fiona, which Elfont and Kaplan thought was a bit too cutting-edge for their audience, which they perceive to be more Spears and Backstreet Boys fans. (Parker Posey ended up playing Fiona, who, it turns out, is a kind of villainous version of a cool-hunter in the film.)

"Josie and the Pussycats" is the latest in a string of films coming from Hollywood intended to capitalize on the burgeoning teen-girl market. Indeed, though a rash of teen films have tanked recently--"Tomcats," "Get Over It" and "Head Over Heels"--the ones with primarily young female appeal (and explicit girl-empowerment messages)--"Bring It On," "Save the Last Dance" and "Charlie's Angels"--have sailed to healthy box office success.

Elfont and Kaplan's first film, "Can't Hardly Wait," also targeted the teen audience, but only did moderate business. The filmmakers, who have just signed up to rewrite and direct an update of the 1964 Rock Hudson/Doris Day comedy "Send Me No Flowers," note a growing studio appreciation of girl economic power.

"Since we've been working, it's grown," says Elfont. "I don't know if teenage girls were ignored before, but there's certainly a respect for the audience. There's certainly a feeling that if you aim a movie directly at teenage girls, you can open it."

In its marketing campaign, Universal, according to Elfont and Kaplan, is pointedly not playing up the satirical element, preferring to stress the music--supervised by hit-maker Kenny "Babyface" Edmonds--and the joys of female friendship.

"The goal was to make a kind of movie where it's . . .," starts Elfont.

"A guilty pleasure," finishes Kaplan.

"We want to make sure people know it's a smarter movie than you think it is," Elfont continues. "That's been the challenge throughout, trying to make a movie that could satisfy both audiences, without disappointing everyone. You can be making fun of it, but at the same time, if it's fun, what's the difference?"

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