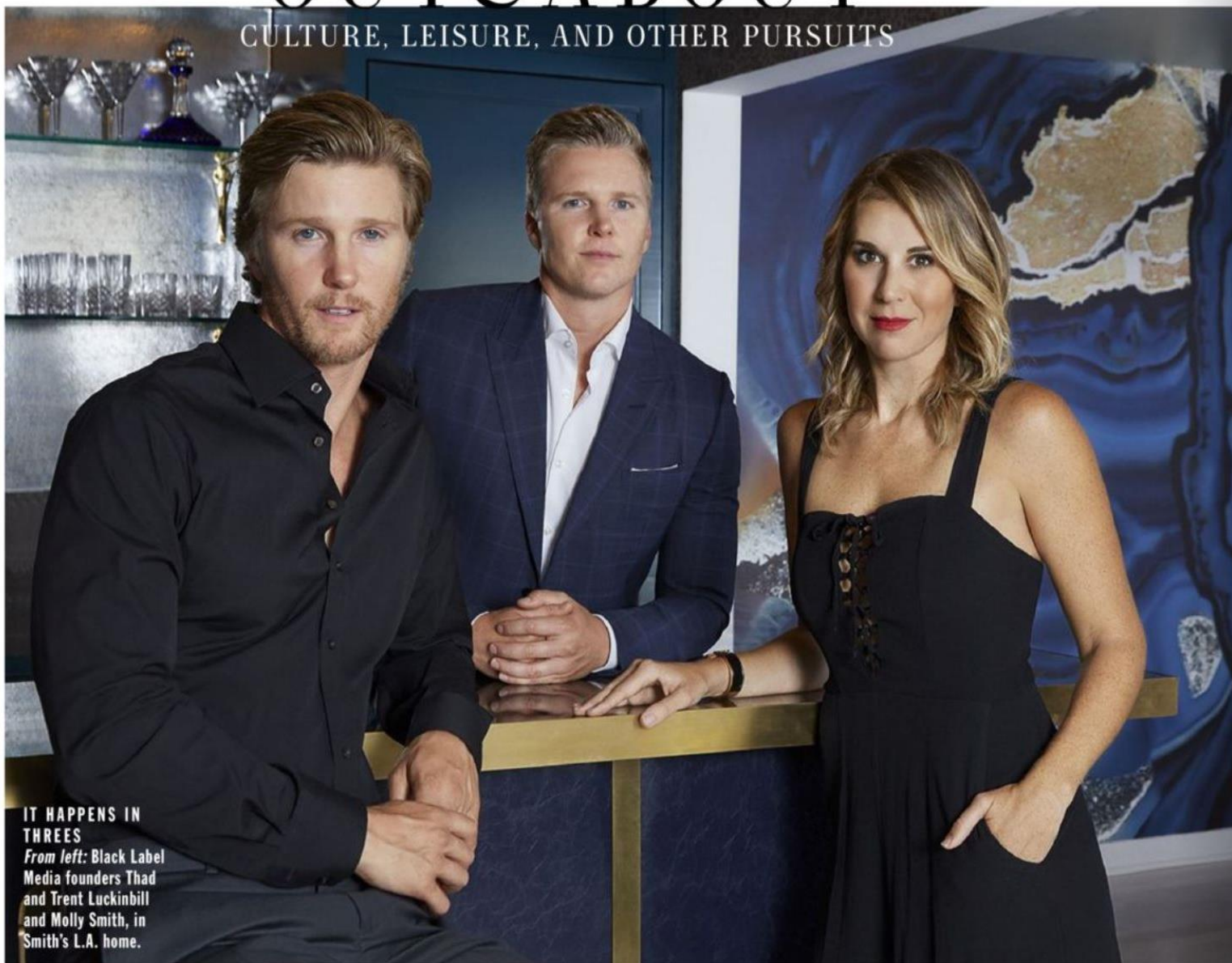


OUT & ABOUT

CULTURE, LEISURE, AND OTHER PURSUITS



IT HAPPENS IN
THREES

From left: Black Label
Media founders Thad
and Trent Luckinbill
and Molly Smith, in
Smith's L.A. home.

FILM *FAMILY* PICTURES

**FOR A TRIO OF
HOLLYWOOD'S
HOTTEST
PRODUCERS,
SUCCESS IS ALL
RELATIVE.**

By Brooks Barnes
Photograph by
Mona Kuhn

It would be easy for Hollywood to roll its eyes at Black Label Media. The five-year-old production company has a name inspired in part by the American Express Centurion Black Card and in part by Johnnie Walker Black. One of the founders, Molly Smith, 36, is the daughter of a billionaire; her dad, Fred Smith, founded FedEx and is a Black Label investor. And she runs Black Label with the Tinsel Twins, a nickname given to Thad and

Trent Luckinbill, 42, by their home state's largest newspaper, the *Oklahoman*. Thad moved to Los Angeles in the late 1990s and ended up starring on *The Young and the Restless* for 11 years. After a career in law and private equity, Trent followed his identical twin to California and took up producing—and surfing. Over lunch at the Viceroy l'Ermitage Beverly Hills, Trent points to a black eye and explains, "I had an accident in the water."

But dismissing Black Label as a vanity operation would be a mistake. Despite having only 10 employees, the company is proving itself to be a serious player on the indie film scene. "You have to be a bit of a gunslinger to make it in this business, and I see that quality in Molly," says Lorenzo di Bonaventura, a veteran producer and studio executive who teamed with Black Label to make October's firefighter drama *Only the Brave*. "It



SCREENING ROOM
 Films from Black Label include 2016's *La La Land*, *Rebel in the Rye*, and the upcoming *Only the Brave*.



explains why Black Label's movies are so singular."

Those movies include Denis Villeneuve's celebrated drug-war thriller *Sicario*, which cost less than \$30 million to make and took in \$85 million in 2015. Last year Black Label jumped at a chance to take a 25 percent stake in a little film called *La La Land*. The musical ended up grossing \$445 million and becoming a cultural sensation, missing the Oscar for best picture by an eighth note—or a bungled envelope. "Certainly the success of *La La Land* increases our credibility," Thad says.

Black Label has also made mistakes. It produced *The Good Lie*, a drama about Sudanese refugees that flopped in 2014. But Smith and her partners have learned from these errors. "We loved the film but realized we could really be in trouble if we tried to go wide," Smith says. "So we pulled back and got to video-on-demand sooner, which was a tough call but the right one. It ended up being very profitable." Black Label's recent bets include *Rebel in the Rye*, a J.D. Salinger biopic; the upcoming *Horse Soldiers*, an Afghanistan military drama produced with Jerry Bruckheimer; and *Soldado*, a sequel to *Sicario*. Smith describes their taste in films as "commercially

viable prestige."

Smith, laid-back in jeans, is sitting on the l'Ermitage patio with Thad and Trent. She does most of the talking, perhaps because she has the most experience. She started in 1999 as an intern at Alcon Entertainment, which is best known for

2009's hit *The Blind Side*—the script for which she personally rescued from the rejection pile. "I'm like the additional sister they never wanted," she says of the twins. "We finish each other's sentences."

As if on cue, Trent pipes up. "We all think alike, and our taste is the same," he says. "Maybe it's the Southern

connection."

Smith, who grew up in Memphis, points out that her younger sister Rachel also works for Black Label. "Being such a family-oriented company has allowed us to keep our circle small," she says. "It really provides a foundation of trust."

Thad nods. "It definitely feels less corporate, which is something we all like," he says. "I probably focus a bit more on the creative side, given my acting experience. Since Trent is a lawyer, he and Molly deal more with the business, and I love watching them in action."

Smith says she learned dealmaking from her father. "Hollywood likes to put a gun to your head, and he doesn't react to that," she says. "If it's a good business decision, it's probably going to be there tomorrow." ◀

RAGS & Riches

A NEW PLAY REVIVES '80S CRIMES AND FASHION.



FOLLOWING SUIT

From left: Michael Milken, who pleaded guilty to securities fraud in 1989; a Catherine Zuber sketch for *Junk*.



In designing costumes for a play about Reagan-era high finance, it could be tempting to rely on the wide-shouldered pin-striped suits that have become synonymous with the era. But for Catherine Zuber, the Tony-winning costume designer creating the looks for *Junk* (a new play from Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Ayad Akhtar, beginning previews October 5 at Lincoln Center Theater), a subtle approach toward dressing characters inspired by the likes of Michael Milken and Ivan Boesky was key. "It needs a nod to the time period

without being so '80s that it becomes a distraction," says Zuber, who uses pieces from Giorgio Armani and Cerruti in the show. "I'm careful not to turn them into caricatures, but I thought we should push it just a little bit." *Adam Rathe*