THE WAY I SEE IT
Mary Portas

As the fourth of five children, the teenage Mary Portas had a gift for drama that went all the way down to her purple flares. Family tragedy forced her to turn down a place at RADA but the retail and communications guru got her moments in the spotlight nonetheless, from dressing the windows of London's most famous stores to founding her own creative communications agency, Portas. She tells *Selena Schleh* about falling in ponds, fashion advertising fails and the future of retail

I was born in 1960, in Watford, north London. My earliest memory is sitting in a little chair on top of a Silver Cross pram, being pushed down the road to the shops, with my little brother in the pram behind me. I must have been about two and a half. I remember looking back at my mother, feeling like I was on top of the world.

Growing up, I was the naughty one, causing havoc and expressing myself. When I was 15, I used to tag along with my older sister to the local nightclub, Bailey's, and she would make out I was 18 to get me through the door. I once got so drunk I fell in the pond outside. Recently, the mayor of Watford invited me back to make a speech at the re-opening of the pond, and all I could visualise was me, at 15, after too many Pernod and blacks, lying in it.

I was a Saturday girl at the most gorgeous department store at the top of town, called Clements. Watford hasn't changed drastically, it's still a busy, big old town, but what breaks my heart is that Clements has lost its soul and has just ended up selling carpets.

As a teenager, I was influenced by the rock stars of the time: I would literally go around with a Ziggy Stardust zig-zag painted on my face. But my favourite outfit was a pair of knitted purple flares from Chelsea Girl, handed down to me from my cousin Caroline, which I wore with enormous cork wedges. I don't know what sort of a vision I cut in them, but I felt a million dollars. [At the time] I hated my body, which was little and waif-thin, but actually it was an extraordinary clothes peg for the whole slinky 70s look.

You won't believe this, but I genuinely did not have any new clothes bought for me until my 13th birthday. I used to wait for my Aunty Cathy to come round with a bin liner of hand-me-downs from my cousins, and in the excitement, it didn't matter that it was second-hand.

We used to watch an awful lot of telly as kids. It was my mother's little bit of light relief when she was making supper. The first advert to really make an impression on me was R White's Lemonade – the guy coming down and sneaking a drink from the fridge [*Secret Lemonade Drinker*] – which I thought was just the funniest. Or the Brooke Bond chimpanzee ads: my father worked for Brooke Bond, so we got all the toys free and met the chimps at the Brooke Bond Christmas parties.

Those 70s ads made me realise the power of advertising as being not just a chance to say 'I want one of those' but also as being entertaining. It was all about the jingle going into your head: we used to sing the brand name and not think twice about it. 'Golden Wonder [peanuts], they're jungle fresh!' or 'Opal Fruits: Made to make your mouth water'. That was so powerful. Now [brands] buy huge pieces of music from current pop stars but they don't get their name in.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANTHONY CASSIDY

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I'd been asked many times if I'd do a memoir [*Shop Girl*, published earlier this year by Doubleday] and I thought: God, that's the last thing I want to do. There was something slightly self-indulgent about it. Then I went on [BBC Radio 4 show] *Desert Island Discs*, which as a Brit is the ultimate thing to be asked to do – I think most Americans, in their head, write their Oscars speech and most Brits choose their *Desert Island Discs* – and in choosing my songs, I realised the music was a journey through some very emotional and important times of my life. It was the first time someone had really asked me about my childhood. I thought: I need to write this down. I didn't feel confident about doing a formal autobiography, so I wrote it in vignettes. It was actually really enjoyable. I have a cabin in my garden, and I just sat in there and wrote.

I never think about what might have been if I'd pursued an acting career [Portas turned down a place at RADA when her mother died suddenly], because I've had the most extraordinary life. I've been able to express myself through all the communications work I do, on stages I never knew existed. The little show-off in me – the fact that I was the fourth out of five kids and never had a voice – has been fulfilled in other ways. Dressing windows at Harrods, creating installations at Harvey Nichols, the work that I do with my agency, Portas – they are all really expressive, creative things. I've gone on TV, given talks and been on the road with my book. So I got my stage in the end.

What my mother gave to me was a secure upbringing which rooted me with love and structure, which I think is the most important thing for any child. So when she died, I was able, somehow, to try and channel that. In later life, I've started to connect on a deeper level. I meditate and harness that energy in a really good way. I think in my early days it was a slightly angst-ridden fear that got me where I am, and now it's a much more primal, deep-rooted fear that comes from a deeper source of energy.

After studying visual merchandising at Cassio College in Watford, I started working as a window dresser at Harrods. Four years later I moved to Topshop, where I became the display manager aged just 24. Because I was very young when I got into management, it's hard to know what my peers thought of me. I always had a mad, high-octane energy and a need to succeed. I could see that if I made money I'd be safe, and that drove me. I don't think I was ever ruthless; I never became that ballsy, knock-other-people-out-of-the-way person. I definitely wanted to win the race, though. I didn't want to come in second.

As a craft, window dressing is like interior design. You have a three-dimensional space and you have to create a flow, it's like a piece of music. There are high notes, and bass notes. You need to look up and then you need to bring the person's eye level down. Most people are apathetically walking along, so you need to make them stop and think: I want a bit of that! I never, ever started with the product, which used to piss the buyers off. I started with an idea and a concept that I felt was culturally relevant or creatively inspiring. It could be from an art gallery or a newspaper. I'll never forget seeing an article about Carhenge in Nebraska, where a load of nutters had put these cars on their sides in the desert to replicate Stonehenge. It was the most amazing vision. So I got all these old car parts and did the same thing in the windows at Topshop.

In the 80s, in America, stores like The Limited and The Gap were doing these wonderful, huge experiential store environments. Sir Ralph Halpern, who was chairman of Topshop at the time, used to send me to New York to look at what they were doing and that inspired me to bigger and better things. I created installations in windows and in-store that were nothing to do with product, they were just exciting and 'wow'. But what they said about the brand is that it was a fun, cool place, and they drove people in.

I moved to Harvey Nichols in 1990, just as Lisa Armstrong, then fashion editor at *The Independent*, wrote a piece saying the department store was dead. I thought: 'Oh my God. Great timing, Portas.' This was the era of the super brands and bling culture when brands like Versace and Dolce & Gabbana were opening their own boutiques. Department stores were seen as these slightly frumpy places where old women went for afternoon tea and fell asleep on the banquette seating after a glass of sherry, or where you got sprayed in the face with perfume in the beauty hall. When I became creative director in 1990 I wanted to do stuff that got talked about.

At London Fashion Week, they were putting the same designers who could afford a catwalk show down the runway and New York and Paris were getting all the buzz. I thought: we've got the best fashion colleges in the world, why don't we show the next generation of designers? We worked with the Royal College of Art and Central St Martins to put on these catwalk shows, and every buyer in the world, all our competitors, had to come and sit in our store to see who was the future. Then I did a deal with actress Jennifer Saunders for [hit 1990s TV show] *Absolutely Fabulous*, where we supplied the clothes and gave them access to the store while filming, and in return Harvey Nichols would be the only store that was name-checked in the show. The whole thing was making the store talked about.

Our advertising was done by a great little agency called Harari Page. We got designers to create beautiful bespoke stuff for Harvey Nichols and we'd shoot it, working together with the designers so they became a really important part of the creative process. Those adverts carried a message of exclusivity and alongside all the marketing and brand behaviours made Harvey Nichols the place to be seen. In terms of designers, Harrods had a much greater selection, but we became the coolest destination.

Understanding the power of different touchpoints in retail was why I set up my own agency, Yellowdoor [now Portas]. One of the marketing deals I did early on at Harvey Nichols was to offer Dolce & Gabbana free space on the shop floor for their collection, because I knew it was going to be one of the sexiest labels. Or giving cosmetics brand MAC the whole front window of the store. They put the biggest drag act of the time, RuPaul, in the window and we made the front cover of the *Evening Standard*. That got me thinking, why isn't there an agency which specialises in this kind of thing? This is more powerful than just ads.

When we launched Louis Vuitton's Bond Street Maison, it had to be more than just another glossy store. We looked at what inspires and motivates Vuitton's customers, and it was luxury connected to the art world. So we brought in designers and artists to create installations and give talks [through the Arts Education programme, an association between Britain's biggest art institutions] and the word-of-mouth effect through those connections was much more powerful, because we were speaking to a small, very wealthy percentage of the audience. How many agencies have that kind of understanding?

The future is all about the retail experience, whether that's digital or offline. It's no longer about big, glossy advertising. What advertising agencies have got to understand is what inspires people to shop and there are so many different touchpoints for that. What you're creating is instinctive thinking, and true brand understanding. That's where the equity is. More and more retailers will be looking for that in the future, especially as we're looking at a new generation who'll be buying less and thinking about their place in the world. How do we connect with that? That's very exciting.

As a woman in a single-sex marriage, with kids, I think the industry needs to be pushing the envelope much further when it comes to representing LGBT lifestyles in advertising. Not using creative shock tactics – 'Oh, look at us, we're so cool and groovy' – but as an intrinsic part of the way we live. We've just done an engagement and wedding campaign with [jewellery retailer] Goldsmiths, and the brilliant CEO said, 'Let's not forget about the single-sex couples.' But often brands are scared, so it's the role of agencies to hold their hands. Look at the gay pound, if we're talking about fashion. Look at the massive roster of gay male designers. And yet how often do you see that reflected in fashion advertising? The industry has got a long way to go, but it's on the right journey. There's been some great stuff breaking through: Acne, for example, has been a real voice for LGBT. They were the first brand to use transgender guys in their advertising, and the owner [Jonny Johansson] put his 11-year-old son into their most recent womenswear campaign. But you've got to have confidence, and this is where I get back to vision at the top of brands. Who are the people making these decisions? They've got to have confidence in their brands, too.

We have to understand that there's a level of commerciality in [fashion] advertising. Benetton did some amazing advertising, but did that sell more jumpers? It was the same with French Connection and the FCUK re-brand. Everyone said 'How fabulous, isn't this great?' but that campaign has left the brand without a clear fashion equity today. Jokey statements on T-shirts should have been a one-off. You have to make sure that your product has as much integrity as the creative message that you're putting out. With Benetton, its advertising was radical, but unfortunately its product wasn't.

When it comes to the luxury market, the money that is spent is mainly at the 40-plus end. These women want to know: is it well-made and is it going to make me look beautiful? And often the safest way of doing that [through advertising] is showing beautiful women, wearing beautiful products. It's worked the world over: it doesn't always need reinventing. That's not to say that you shouldn't do new things within fashion advertising. But you have to understand the market and there must be legitimacy at the core. The sportswear market can be more radical: there have been some interesting partnerships with music stars. *Zoolander 2* at Valentino's Paris Fashion Week show was an example of introducing wit at the right time. But let's be honest here: in general, the fashion industry takes itself very seriously. So you rarely get people at the top whose attitude is: 'Woo-hoo! Let's shake this up!'

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One of the best pieces of advertising I've seen recently was the *#LidlSurprises* campaign. The TV commercial tapped totally into the middle market, which would normally have belonged to Sainsbury's. Not only that, Lidl has taken it through the whole customer journey, at every touchpoint in the store, from service to packaging. So what you've got is a truly integrated campaign with the customer at its heart. I think that's very clever. When it comes to services, people have emotional responses. Far too often, at the top of supermarkets there are men making decisions, when 80 per cent of the buying decisions are made by women.

On the subject of women, we can't not discuss the elephant in the room. Women, children, family... how do you embrace that in a culture that's invariably about working every hour and putting clients first and being there whenever and however? Well, you have to. The beauty of today is that we are on email. We have mobile phones stuck to our heads, so if you need to speak to [staff] they're there at the end of the phone, it's as simple as that. We need to work around this maternity business, because I genuinely think that women are extraordinary when it comes to multi-disciplined activity. If you have competent people in your business, work around their life. It's a really important thing to do. One of the reasons I left Harvey Nichols was that I had to go back to work three months after having my son and I resented it. I remember them saying, 'Yes, but if we set a precedent...' I thought: 'Fuck off with your precedents.'

How do I juggle running an agency with all my other projects and family life? I surround myself with great people, pay them well and give them a life that they enjoy. It's quite simple. I love a good slice of the cake, but I love sharing it out too. I genuinely love the excitement of inspiring people. I could have taken our agency in so many different directions, but I only want to do work that makes a difference, that's really exciting and with clients that we like. I'm not driven by money or by growth. I'm driven by fantastic work and a great environment. And off the back of that, it just works.

When you do great work, someone unexpected will phone you up and want to work with you. I think that when you set out hurdles like 'I want to work with this brand and that brand' and you make a list, you actually miss some of the things that were meant to come your way.

Give it everything you've got. That's the advice I'd give anyone starting out in the industry. The people that come into the agency and give 110 per cent make me think: 'You're going to stick with me, I'm going to work with you, whatever.'

The best day of my career was finding out I'd got on the board of Harvey Nichols, aged 30. That was pretty phenomenal. The worst days of my career were when I was advising the government about the high street [in 2011 Portas published an independent review into the future of Britain's high streets] and it became political. I was in the press every week with many shitty comments and headlines. You get used to that, because you think: I know who I am and I know what I'm doing. But those things are still painful.

I can be a bit black and white and I make presumptions very quickly. If I could change one thing about myself, I would be much more mindful of that.

If I could time travel, I'd go back to the 20s, to a jazz bar in a basement in New York.

My biggest fear is anything happening to my family.

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The last time I cried was at that photo of the little Syrian child on the beach in Turkey. It was one of the most traumatic things I've ever seen. It links to my fears about family, because you realise that's someone's child.

'Dollsy' is what my wife calls me. She thinks it's the funniest nickname because it's the complete antithesis of me: I'm the least dolly-like person.

My sister did one of those Myers-Briggs tests at work and was told she was an extrovert. She said: 'You think I'm an extrovert? Have you met my sister?' All her life she thought she was an introvert because she compared herself to me!

I listen to a huge amount of music and I love going to gigs and seeing new bands. But I'm also a great walker, I'm a Forrest Gump. I'll put on my boots and walk for hours with the dog on Hampstead Heath. It clears my mind.

'Streamlined' is how I would describe my look. I tend to wear a lot of Acne and Celine because [the clothes] suit my height and body shape. But at home, I have a couple of pairs of sloppy pants that I feel really relaxed in and I don't care who sees me.

My heroes are David Bowie and the philosopher Eckhart Tolle. I've read every word of his: it's central to what I believe in.

Unfairness and inequality make me angry. But greed makes me angriest of all. When I read about Costa Coffee putting the price of their coffee up because of the rise in the UK minimum wage, I thought: 'But you make huge profits, why do you need to do that? How much more do you want?!' Pay the people the right wage. It's the good thing to do.

The single greatest and worst human invention is the internet.

I've stopped Googling myself; I don't have Google alerts or any of that stuff any more. I think it was Auden who wrote: 'The good reviews go to your head and the bad reviews go to your heart, so treat them both with the same indifference.' And that's what I do. If you don't know about it, it's fine.

If I was the UK prime minister for the day, I would do loads of bloody things. Most importantly I would give serious rate rebates to the next generation of small independent retailers to help their business ideas blossom. It wouldn't have to be retail, it could be social destinations, too. And I would offer some of the big retailers tax breaks to open up factories in this country to bring production and manufacturing back into the UK.

My ambitions change all the time. From my charity shops work [Portas has opened a chain of shops in support of Save The Children], to setting up an agency and now planning its international growth, to launching my fashion collection, I'm always on to something. If something excites me, I just have to follow it through. Do you remember that kids' game with the swinging ball and the central pole? That central pole is my family, and my ambition is that they're healthy and happy. I swing around, doing the things I want to do, and drive them all mad.

The people who know me, who really know me, I hope will remember me as a force of good.

There's a song by [jazz singer] Gregory Porter called *Be Good* which makes me cry. It's what I always say to my kids: 'Did you do what was good? It doesn't matter if you're cheeky, or if you're out there having a puff on a spliff. Be good to the people in the world.' Because at the end of the day, that's all that matters.