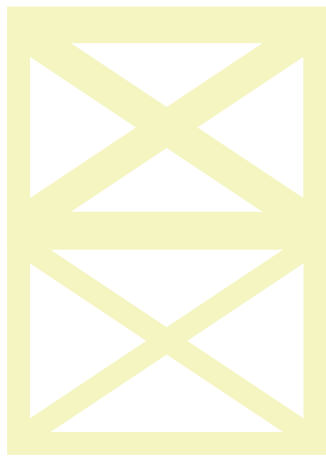


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On sparkling form

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Photograph by Amy Elkins

Billion-hit baby

Once seen, never forgotten... Maddie Ziegler's dance videos – which have earned her stratospheric YouTube views – are jaw-dropping by any standards. Then you learn she's only 12. *Helena de Bertodano* meets the pre-teen phenomenon

She is only 12 years old but her dance videos have been viewed over a billion times on YouTube. As the public face of the reclusive Australian singer-songwriter Sia, little Maddie Ziegler has become one of the most famous pre-teens on the planet.

But you wouldn't know it to meet her. Dressed in black track pants, Nike trainers and a T-shirt with the slogan KISSING IS COOL, she looks like any normal kid when we meet in Hollywood at her publicist's office. Although she lives in Pennsylvania, Ziegler has moved to Los Angeles for a couple of months with her mother and younger sister Mackenzie to film the next series of *Dance Moms*, the reality TV show that first made her name four years ago.

Even by Ziegler's standards, the past year has been exceptional as her partnership with Sia has launched her into pop superstardom: in the past few months she has performed on *Saturday Night Live*, *Ellen* and even at the Grammys. "Kim and Kanye were right in the front," she says, her eyes wide

in astonishment. "I was freaking out that they were watching me dance."

A few months ago I saw Ziegler performing live at the Hollywood Bowl with Sia. She was mesmerising, a tiny elf pirouetting across the huge stage in her platinum-blonde wig and flesh-coloured leotard while Sia, back turned to the audience, belted out her hit song *Chandelier*. All the attention was on Ziegler, whose performance was flawless. "That was probably the biggest crowd I've ever danced in front of," she says. "I still get nervous. I'm a perfectionist so I always want everything to be great."

Her mother, Melissa Ziegler-Gisoni, pops in and out of the office, divided between chaperoning Maddie and taking care of Mackenzie, 10, who is vomiting back at their apartment. "She's like a little drama queen," says Maddie, rolling her eyes in typical sibling contempt. Maddie herself doesn't seem to need much chaperoning. Poised and unflustered, she sits on the sofa quietly, a small oasis of calm amid the chaos that accompanies her everywhere. There



is no attitude or tween sulkiness – she speaks openly and enthusiastically, looking directly at me with her big blue eyes, far more switched on than many adults I interview.

It was *Dance Moms* – which follows the early careers of girls and their doting, sometimes rivalrous, mothers – that caught the attention of Sia, the Grammy-nominated artist. She sent Ziegler a tweet inviting her to dance in her next music video. Ziegler thought it was a joke. “I said to my mom, ‘I don’t believe this.’”

But the tweet was genuine and Ziegler has now become almost as famous as Sia herself. The 39-year-old singer Sia Furler, who chooses to hide her face behind masks and wigs, has said that she finds fame “horrible” and that she wants “to be invisible”. Ziegler’s role is to play “a state” of the singer, and emulate her appearance in a blonde, bobbed wig. Together they have produced three haunting videos – the first, *Chandelier*, has had more than 688 million views on YouTube: it features Ziegler dancing solo in a barren apartment – spinning, kicking and crawling through the deserted rooms. “There’s a part where I go into the hallway,” says Ziegler, “and it was the creepiest hallway and I was so scared. I was like, ‘Could someone please come out here with me?’”

The second video, *Elastic Heart*, features her sparring with the actor Shia LaBeouf in a cage and has had more than 250 million views. It sparked controversy from some who said the relationship between LaBeouf, 28, and Ziegler looked inappropriate, forcing Sia to issue an apology. As Ziegler understood it, they were portraying wolves living in a cage. “I’m the tough one, which is funny because I’m the little one. That’s why I was growling a lot. It was hard for me because I’m not an animal.”

In the recently released third of the triptych, *Big Girls Cry*, the focus on Ziegler, as a mini-Sia, is even more intense – we see only her eerily expressive face as she gulps for air and tugs at her eyelids. Sia always

makes sure Ziegler is completely comfortable with the content. “She says, ‘If it’s ever too much for you, you have to say you can’t handle it.’”

If anything, Sia tries to make Ziegler



Ziegler cannot remember a time when she didn’t dance. “I was two for my first dance recital: we did this little *Nutcracker* performance – when I came off the stage I was crying and my mom was like, ‘Why are you crying?’ and I said, ‘Because I want to go back on stage.’”

So her mother enrolled her in the dance studio of Abby Lee Miller, who features in *Dance Moms* as a highly demanding instructor, focused on driving her young charges to perfection. It quickly became

Clockwise from left Maddie with her mother and little sister earlier this year; performing with Sia live at the Hollywood Bowl; the video for *Big Girls Cry*



clear that Ziegler – who is often depicted as Abby’s favourite – had exceptional talent. “I started off in the baby programme and then two weeks later I was moved up to the older class. I wasn’t so much the best dancer but I was really smart in picking up choreography.”

The intensity of the programme, with weekend dance competitions far from

even more childlike, telling her not to wear make-up. “One time I had fake nails on and she said, ‘You have to cut those.’”

The pair have become close. “It feels like I’ve known Sia for my whole entire life,” says Ziegler, who loves going to her

‘I was two for my first dance recital. When I came off the stage I was crying. My mom was like, “Why?” and I said, “Because I want to go back on stage”’

house to play with her dogs. “You’d never think she was a celebrity because she’s just so humble and sweet and caring.”

Melissa says that Sia is very protective of her daughter. “They’re like sisters, I love how they snuggle together.”

home, took its toll on the family. Melissa divorced Ziegler’s father, Kurt, in 2011, saying at the time, “My ex-to-be claims that dance has ruined our marriage.” Both parents have since remarried and Ziegler has two half brothers and

a stepbrother and stepsister. "I don't see as much of my dad, I live with my stepdad, who's awesome. He's like my best friend. I usually see my dad on holidays, like Thanksgiving or Christmas Eve – definitely not Christmas though, because all my presents are at my house."

Although she seems well-adjusted, Ziegler does not even try to pretend that her life is like that of an average 12-year-old. "I don't feel that normal any more because I get recognised, even when I'm just trying to have fun or going to get ice cream with my friends. People go crazy and it gets overwhelming." Indeed, a sharp-suited man sits outside the door of her publicist's office. I ask him what his role is in all this. "Top secret," he says, with a smile. It later emerges that he is

'Dance is my number one priority but I'm also doing a lot of acting and singing. I definitely want to be a triple threat'

part of Ziegler's security team. "We have 24-hour security. Kipper's my favourite," she says, referring to the current detail. She giggles, "He's good-looking, too."

Her mother describes a recent visit to Topshop. "There were 30 girls following her and going, 'Maddie, Maddie, Maddie.' Sometimes they start crying and Maddie is like, 'No, please don't cry!'"

Although Ziegler admits to being a little starstruck herself when she meets a celebrity, she says she does her best to disguise it. Her mother, however, is less restrained. "Mom is like, 'Oh my God, let's go and meet Ariana Grande.' I'm like, 'Mom, for real?' I just want to stay professional. I don't want them to think I'm a fangirl. I'm one of the performers and I'm not just a background dancer, I'm *the* dancer."

This sounds more arrogant than it comes across. Though quite matter-of-fact about her talents, Ziegler is the first to admit that she is not good at everything. "I'm not sporty at all. I can barely catch a ball. My stepbrothers try to teach me hockey but I'm horrible at it."

She also volunteers that she is finding

maths a struggle. "I used to love math but it's getting too difficult for me now with algebra." For the past two years she has been home-schooled and she takes her studies seriously. "I need to make sure I am still getting an education, I don't just want to be a dumb dancer."

Naturally slim, Ziegler says that she doesn't think too much about what she eats. "Some dancers are on a strict diet



Ziegler (far right) with Abby Lee Miller, J-Lo and other *Dance Moms* cast members

but my mom lets me eat whatever because I burn it all off. I love grilled chicken and steak. I used to be into fruit roll-ups and junk food but not any more."

A typical day, she says, starts at 7.30am. "I used to be such an early bird but now my mom has to wake me up about 20 times. Usually I just stay in my sweat pants and go to my tutor's house from 8.30 to 12.30." Her younger sister, also a dancer, accompanies her to the tutor – which, says Maddie bluntly, is annoying. "We don't get along at all." The rest of the day is spent filming and dancing, sometimes until late in the evening. When she gets home, she unwinds by watching her favourite programme, *Pretty Little Liars*. "I get so

scared but I have to watch it," she says.

Ziegler describes herself and Mackenzie as polar opposites. "I'm responsible. She's not. She loves spending money and I like to save it. If something is a lot of money, I'm like, 'Mom, you don't have to buy this for me.' But Mackenzie is like, 'You are buying me this.' She'll do anything in her power to get a Louis Vuitton purse."

Melissa says her elder daughter is very organised and mature. "She's definitely type A – she lays out all her clothes the night before, she has to be early for everything." But, she says, she still sees flashes of the little girl in her. "Even though she's so worldly, she's also really naive – which I love. When she's with her friends, they really play."

Ziegler says she feels older than most children her age. "I have an old soul. Yesterday one of the producers was crying because she was going through a rough time with her relationship. I was going, 'Are you OK?' and she was saying, 'I can't

believe I'm crying to a 12-year-old."

Her ambition, she says, is to leave reality TV and become a "real" actress. "I'd love to be an actress in movies and scripted TV shows. Dance is my number one priority but I'm also doing a lot of acting and singing. I definitely want to be a triple threat."

Although she could never have dreamt that she would be this famous at the age of 12, Ziegler says that she doesn't feel that she has made it yet. "On a scale of one to 10, I feel I'm at a nine because there's definitely room for improvement. I know I could go further."

In the short term, she is looking forward to a summer with no commitments. "This is my first summer off in five years, I'm so excited." So what will she do with all that free time? Ziegler flops back on the sofa: "Nothing," she replies, smiling triumphantly. ●