

PLAYBACK

The Producers - Lesley Parrott: The grace and humor behind the boards by: **Teresa Iezzi** - Feb 23, 1998

The inaugural focus of this new annual series on broadcast producers is Lesley Parrott. The following report profiles her career

As a young woman of 18, newly unshackled by the bonds of academe, Lesley Parrott looked toward a career in social work where she could apply her boundless energy and long cultivated gift for people to the hard cases all around her. She has since counseled many souls, but with a slight change of venue - from the mean streets of her Glasgow birthplace to the clean streets of the Toronto ad business. Along the way she has also become one of the most respected figures in the commercial production industry.

With over three decades behind her on the agency side of commercial production, Parrott is recognized as a professional force that, from accounts of those who know her, is made all the more potent by the genuine humanity of her approach to work and to life. It's an approach which answers no contest to the Machiavellian loved-versus-feared dialectic.

The question of fear, or lack thereof, provided a key pivot point on which her whole professional life turned upon her arrival in Canada in 1965.

On her second visit to a Toronto employment agency (she passed on her first offer to join the typing pool of an insurance company), she was asked to describe herself, to which she offered: "Well, I'm not afraid of anything." The prescient response: "Well, you should be in advertising."

Since then, she has made a career as an agency producer and manager of people by being what observers say is a model of professionalism in the job and contributing to the production discipline as a whole. She has worked with and created industry organizations to better the body of knowledge shared among its practitioners and is an enthusiastic mentor to young hopefuls coming through the ranks.

At the same time, she has worked to raise the humanity bar in the industry on a person-by-person basis and provides huge contributions to the volunteer organizations she supports: Bereaved Families of Ontario, as a member of the board and public awareness committee, as a facilitator for bereavement support and an organizer of the auction which has become an ad industry event; and as founder and board director of the youth street-proofing program Stay Alert... Stay Safe.

On top of it all, there's the family, the farm, the cooking, the gardening ("she has planned and planted one of the best country gardens in Grey County," says J. Walter Thompson director of broadcast services Nansi Thomas) and a sense of humor and appreciation of irreverence that puts her in good stead when it comes to mental jousts with the Mark Fitzgeralds of the world. ("He thinks he's pretty outrageous," says Parrott. "I like to be more so.")

"I've had good gigs," says Parrott of a career that has consistently put her at the apex of change on the Canadian agency scene - Ogilvy & Mather, JWT and MacLaren McCann - during some of the brightest creative and production years at each agency.

Currently in her role as senior vp, director of broadcast and creative services at MacLaren, she oversees an eight-person production department and manages the unique office lives of 30 creatives.

"Lesley's forgotten more stuff than I can ever hope to know," says Doug Lowe, vp, director of broadcast production at Young & Rubicam and a longtime friend who works with Parrott in the producers training initiatives.

"She's a role model for any producer in the business - male or female. I've never heard of her losing her poise or composure. She's got enormous integrity, grace and sense of humor."

The awards, including the 1990 Spiess Award for outstanding contribution to commercial production, attest to her various skills, but any discussion of Parrott the producer or Parrott the volunteer with those who know her necessarily includes her real involvement with individuals in each capacity.

"You'll hear from everyone what a great producer she is, but she brings a real sense of humanity to it all," says Radke Films head Edie Weiss. "She makes a connection beyond just the business of making commercials and really goes to the person."

Weiss provides perhaps the essential Parrott moment in the story of the first time the two worked on a shoot together. During her down time, Parrott administered the Myers Briggs psychological test to those on set, who then were brought together to reveal the personal answers amongst themselves.

"That has typified my sense of Lesley since I've known her," says Weiss. "She's always bringing out in people the best of what they are and the strengths of what people are."

"I like people and I'm interested in them," explains Parrott, who returns the high esteem given her by an industry that is often cast as soulless. She acknowledges the tremendous support she received during a time of profound personal hardship after the loss of daughter Alison. "There are great people in this industry; no one knows that better than me," she says. "There's been so much kindness and support; it's been unequivocal."

Parrott calls herself "more than anything, a real student of people."

She's also been a dedicated student of production, an area which she says has always involved a high degree of on-the-job learning, and she has made strides to provide an outside source of professional information to those in the job.

Parrott is founding president of the Canadian Agency Producers Association, formed in the mid '80s to increase the profile and professionalism of the job.

"Producing involves such a huge amount of knowledge," says Parrott. "We wanted to train people so the whole level of producing was upgraded."

The efforts of CAPA were absorbed into a joint initiative with the Institute of Canadian Advertising for an upgraded producers course to offer a more critical agency point of view on the process.

Parrott also routinely holds internal agency and client production seminars.

"The ICA Broadcast Production Course was revamped by Lesley to grow better producers," says Thomas. "Producers now sit at the negotiating table with ACTRA, in seats formerly occupied by slightly bewildered agency presidents. She has mentored many of us who are following her footsteps."

While Parrott acknowledges a fierce loyalty to the agency she works for, she says she's always believed in taking an industry view and fostering pan-industry improvement. With that collective effort comes a camaraderie between department heads, which Parrott embraces and which she says has recently reached unprecedented levels.

Together with her contemporaries, last year Parrott helped form an ICA Broadcast Advisory Committee, which is now tackling a key cost-tracking initiative to monitor ad production spending.

ICA president Rupert Brendon says Parrott's role as chair of the BAC - which is doing "breakthrough work" in production costing - is just one of the efforts she has put toward the industry.

"The people I admire most in our business are the consummate professionals who give their utmost to their job and still find time to give something back to the industry," says Brendon. "Lesley is such a person."

There's also the youth initiative, Parrott's role as mentor and guidance counselor to aspiring entrants to the field. Among the handfuls of young producers in the industry whom Parrott has guided is Michael Knox, now at The Players Film Company. "She's the den mother to many in the industry," says Knox.

Parrott says she doesn't encourage youngsters to enter the business and gives them the requisite warning about its perils, but she can't hide her own enthusiasm for the industry and its people and has paved the way for many new careers (son Calum is currently undertaking a p.a. stint).

Parrott has helped along people from as far afield as Sri Lanka and Pakistan, providing immigrating producers who lack a support network a foot in the door of agencies.

"She's been a very positive influence," says MacLaren producer Angie Loftus. "She is very supportive and instills confidence in people."

The interest in and affinity for people was instilled early and has proved as enduring as the trademark brogue.

Growing up a minister's daughter in Scotland afforded her ample opportunity to hone her people skills and her helping-hand ethic.

Born in Glasgow, Parrott moved with her family to a small seaside town, complete with rolling hills, grand Scottish manse, salt air and, as a recent trip back attests, the ability to resist the charm-eroding ravages of time.

Parrott describes those childhood years as "idyllic," and says she relished her role in the life of the town and the stream of people it brought.

When she was 14, the family returned to Glasgow and lived in a much less pastoral environment - an urban slum clearance area which provided the next level in the young Lesley's education in humanity

She was heavily involved in social work as a teen and her involvement in the lives around her extended from counseling street toughs to trying to marry off the young ministers in her church.

"I was always organizing people's lives for them," she admits joyfully.

It was a combination of naive charm from a small-town upbringing and no-nonsense street smarts which would lead her to and make her a success in her future career.

The strengths she had in dealing with people were not attended by scholastic success, however. A learning disability (undiagnosed until much later in her life) made her an inconsistent student, so when she was 15 and allowed to leave school, she did.

After a maternally enforced stint in secretarial college, the plan was to continue her social work on a formal basis with a youth leadership program, but at 18 she was three years shy of the age requirement.

The new plan: a three-city, three-year tour of New York, Toronto and Montreal, which, through brotherly intervention, started in Toronto.

Parrott arrived in t.o. smack in the middle of the decade of dreams, when jobs were as available as love (Parrott met hubby Peter months after arriving in Toronto).

From her first agency job as an assistant to the director of broadcast and junior producer at Breithaupt Benson (later bought out by James Lovick), Parrott took to the job and regularly worked until the wee hours helping out with new business pitches and generally learning the business.

"Once I hit advertising I immediately liked the style of the people and the irreverence of it," she says. "When success hit I wasn't ever going to let it go."

In those early days, in the wake of live tv, a transition was underway in ad production, and Parrott was in at the ground floor of a major change in the way the process was handled.

"There had been the era of all male producers who would take a storyboard and produce it alone," she recalls. "There was no involvement of the creative people at all. The whole team approach was just beginning to happen."

After the agency was bought out followed by an 18-month stint at Norman Craig & Kummel in production and traffic, learning on the fly, Parrott was called to o&m for a four-and-half-year period marked, she says, by a tremendous learning environment and great friendships.

"At the time, O&M had the strongest department for the new style of production; it was the place to be," she says. "I was able to watch and learn from other people. It was also a place where you really got to understand advertising ideas."

A period of freelancing was followed by a production posting at jwt followed by a move to MacLaren, working with then creative directors Marty Myers and Dennis Bruce and the Gloucester Group creative entity. Then back to jwt, where Marlene Hore had recently been made creative director. As a production player through three decades of changing methods, talent, and budgets, Parrott has been at the forefront of many of the shifts in the role of the producer.

era, creatives assumed more of a role in the process, with producers acting as organizers. In the early '80s, when inflation and production costs took off, the agency producer became a more dominant influence again.

"Clients were looking for strong producers, they wanted to know someone had control of the costs and of the process," says Parrott. "That's where my own role evolved."

As the '80s progressed, the commercial world also exploded with a whole new set of choices in production and post methods, suppliers, directors and global influence, with a more collaborative role between production and creative.

In the '90s, Parrott says a good producer "understands the client's business as well as the production business, understands what a good piece of creative is and what it takes to get that done."

The current cost structure in the Canadian market has provided more opportunities for young directors than ever before, she says, with a director's need to build a reel and an agency's need to meet a budget coinciding.

"It's a good country for a young director," she says. "It's a tough market for a mature director unless they are doing work out of the country as well."

During the years at MacLaren, beginning with the Gloucester Group, and at jwt, Parrott evolved in her role as head of production to include becoming director of creative services, a role which allows her to bring her personal and organizational acumen to creative management, acting as a behind-the-scenes partner for the creative director. To this role Parrott brings intuition and the ability to "keep the whole person intact."

"In managing, particularly creatives, there's a recognition that for them to do what they do they have to be vulnerable to a degree," she says.

Looking back over the growth of the industry, Parrott cites the creatively cyclical evolution therein and the existence of advertising within the broader cultural context of a country: from a kinder gentler country has come kinder gentler creative.

What's required now is more attention to strategic thinking as well as a willingness to cut loose creatively, she says, with her thoughts on the subject more broadly mirroring her own approach to the game: "You can be irreverent and human at the same time."

Career at a glance

1965 - Arrives in Canada and lands in the advertising business. Her first question: "What's advertising?" Starts as a production assistant doing traffic and talent at Breithaupt Benson.

1966-1978 - Broadcast producer at Norman, Craig & Kummel, Ogilvy & Mather, Hayhurst, and J. Walter Thompson.

1978-1983 - MacLaren Advertising. Acts as manager/producer for the standalone creative hot-house, the Gloucester Group.

1983-1994 - J. Walter Thompson, vp, director of creative services.

1986 - Founds the Canadian Agency Producers Association.

1988 - Wins the CFTPA Award for personal achievement in advertising production.

1990 - Wins the Spiess Award for outstanding contribution to commercial production.

Becomes chair of the board of Bereaved Families of Ontario for four years and remains a board member (chairs the 1996 and 1997 Big Night Out auction).

1987 - Founds Stay Alert... Stay Safe, a national street-proofing organization.

1994 - MacLaren McCann, senior vp, director of broadcast and creative services.

1997 - Becomes chair of the ICA broadcast production advisory committee.

The Producers - Lesley Parrott: The Lesley They Know

- **Rick Davis, Executive VP, chief creative officer, MacLaren McCann, Toronto**

No secret this:

Born and bred Canadians have an affinity for the expression "eh?" It's somewhat of a self-conscious Canadianism, as are most Canadianisms. "Am I right or am I wrong?" it wonders. "Will you agree with me?" it asks. "Will it help me avoid confrontation?" "Hopefully, will it make me less declarative?"

Lesley Parrott, who works with me (actually it's more like I work for her) here at MacLaren McCann has put a distinctly Scottish spin on this Canadianism.

Her's goes something like this "eh!"

Lesley peppers the ending of many of her sentences with "eh!" And it's very much reflective of her self.

She is most definitely declarative. She is indeed opinionated and strong-willed.

She is not wrong. She is right. (I have learned this the hard way many time over the past few years. One of these days, I shall get it right.) **Lesley** believes passionately in herself, her family, her friends, her department, her craft, her flowers, her farm, her heritage and she will stand by, and up for, anyone who she believes is being railroaded by bad judgment, lack of compassion or politics. A good way to be, eh? I mean, eh!

This all adds up to a delightful yet strange kind of good-hearted hard-assedness.

Lesley's heart is, paradoxically, at its softest and heaviest as the anniversary of her daughter's tragic death comes and goes every year.

Respectfully, we give her the space she needs at this time to go to that place of mind and spirit where parents who have suffered such enormous loss go. This is when, quite humbly, we try to give back the compassion, support and understanding she has given us the rest of the year.

When she returns, **Lesley** is as feisty, determined and, well, crazy as always (you never heard this from me, but she actually flashes people in the hallways. Not a half flash, mind you. Always a full and proud Scottish flash.)

The richness of **Lesley**'s personality makes us a better company. She makes us a better creative department. She makes me a better creative director.

I say that quite declaratively and with no self-consciousness.

eh!

-Clive Smith, Executive VP, Nelvana, Toronto

"Rabbits... with big pointy ears... you know they're actually antenna?... like radar... you know... "

When **Lesley** called me several years ago with this crazy idea to cast a couple of rabbits in a program that would make kids street smart, not only did I think it was just the kind of wild idea that would work, and indeed a most worthy cause, but an opportunity to get away from bears and ducks for awhile.

"Rabbits, eh?... hmmm... "

"Stay Alert Stay Safe" was born out of an incredibly deep love that Lesley has for the world and everyone around her.

Lesley is a truly remarkable woman. During my brief association with the advertising business it never ceased to amaze me how such a charming, uncomplicated and honest person could survive in that business, let alone rise to the superstatus she has achieved.

Her calm and comforting manner is in total contrast to the normal manic panic approach of most commercial producers, and she sets a tone that encourages people to be their best and allows them to fully explore their talents. Lesley is a breath of fresh air in the industry and totally deserving of the honors bestowed on her.

"People running around in rabbit suits? on skateboards? at the SkyDome? o.k. Lesley... fine... "

- Carlo Trulli, President/executive producer, Spy Films, Toronto

She just keeps going and going and going... "

After 30 years in the advertising community, with countless credits for her many achievements, she has without a doubt earned her "10th Dan Black Belt" in the art of producing. In the face of her quick wit, razor-sharp mind and her ability to speak the truth, I have witnessed art directors and writers retreat to their dens, creative directors take their bow, and suits beg for forgiveness.

As a dear friend, I have known Lesley for nearly 20 years. We first met at J. Walter Thompson where Lesley helmed the broadcast department of eight producers: Pat White, Alana Lytle, Nancy Thomas, Fran Rutherford, Rick Price, Rea Hilts, Terri Black and me. She became everyone's mentor and friend.

Over the years she continues to show her compassion and love for humanity, a precious gift that has benefited all of us who have been a part of her life.

To quote a brilliant moment in the film *As Good As It Gets*, where Helen Hunt demands Jack Nicholson pay her a compliment, Jack replies: "You make me want to be a better man."

- Don McLean, President, The Partners' Film Company, Toronto

I've know Lesley for roughly 33 years. In 1965 she was an 18-year-old commercial producer for Breithaupt Benson Advertising, I was the 32-year-old director of radio and television at Needham Harper and Steers. She has gone on to become one of the premiere agency producers and subsequently head of commercial production at various agencies in Canada. I went into sales.

Her many contributions to this industry are staggering. She was involved in the Canadian Agency Producers Association, in the Commercial Production Association of Toronto, the Institute of Canadian Advertising's

production courses, and more seminars concerning the cost of commercial production than I can count. She functioned as auditor general of our industry during her second time at J. Walter Thompson, compiling an extensive document every year for the agencies and clients on production costs.

She sent me and I'm sure other production companies many young talented people including a scrawny young man in the early '70s by the name of Ian Leech. She has also helped me out on the numerous occasions when my incredible big mouth has gotten me into trouble.

Lesley is a client, a friend and a person I truly admire. In her business and personal life she is a brave, caring and giving human being. Knowing her is a privilege for all of us.

- Marlene Hore, Creative, The Ongoing Partnership, Toronto

Lesley Parrott was my partner in crime from the time I was a lowly unknown copywriter in J. Walter Thompson's Montreal's office (where's that?) right through to when I was vice chairman and national creative director.

She was always more than a producer, she was an advisor, a confidant and a friend.

We shot Red Rose tea commercials together in England in the summer and Kraft commercials in Northern Ontario in the dead of winter. We won awards together, fought battles together, and had a great time doing it.

But when I say I owe much of my success to Lesley, I'm not just waxing poetic and being mushy. The truth is I do owe much of my success to her. It was at a JWT creative seminar where she sat next to the worldwide creative chairman Bert Manning. In her own inimitable, Scottish, chat-them-up-and-charm-them style, she managed to ensure that Bert knew every commercial he liked on the Canadian reel was done by this unknown junior writer from Montreal. At lunch, Bert Manning asked to meet me.

The rest is history. I don't think I ever properly thanked Lesley. Until now. Thank-you Lesley for everything.